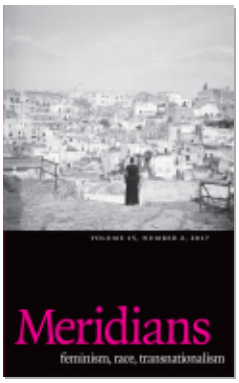
Triangular Voyages: Locating the Transnational Caribbean Woman in Paule Marshall's "To Da-duh, in Memoriam"



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Abstract

Paule Marshall's short story "To Da-duh" offers a pioneering theorization of transnationalism for black Caribbean women, particularly Barbadian women. Examining black female characters' navigation of archetypcal environments in symbolically loaded vehicles and interrogating the representations of black women bodies as complex discursive spaces, the essay explores Barbadian women's struggles with latent colonial paradigms and highlights women's assertions of agency and their challenging of limiting constructs. Utilizing the theoretical insights of numerous transnational and African diasporic scholars, the essay foregrounds issues that have come to define notions of transnationalism, and it elucidates their specific implications for Caribbean women; these issues include representations of home and ancestral connections, negotiations of public and domestic spaces, and depictions black female bodies.

> I began filling in the lacuna [my family] represented with other adopted "kinfolk:" with, for example, the "incorrigibles" in Barbados long ago who had somehow withstood the whipping post and the pillory. I claimed them among my progenitors. Also, "the twenty-and-odd negroes" at Point Comfort, Jamestown, Virginia, who had been exchanged for so many sacks of meal and salted meat before being led

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> off to centuries of John Henry work. Next came Olaudah Equiano, the captured eleven-year-old boy-child from Yoruba Land who had arrived traumatized in Barbados in 1756, only to be transshipped to Point Comfort also.
>
> —Paule Marshall, *Triangular Road*

For most scholars who examine Paule Marshall's oeuvre, the title of her 2009 memoir, *Triangular Road*, and its allusion to Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, might seem an apt description of the author's primary areas of interest. These areas outlined in the above epigraph —Yoruba Land, Barbados and Virginia—also concretize the triangle trade and its aftermath, and highlight the ways in which the Barbadian-American writer claims kinship with various African diasporic communities. Marshall's memoir represents the triangle as a symbol of the African diasporic/transnational individual, and such formations abound when one examines her work. In keeping with Marshall's memoir's negotiations of multiple spaces, interest in her works' African diasporic and transnational leanings goes as far back as the groundbreaking theorizations of scholars such as Abena Busia (1989) and Joyce Pettis (1992, 1993). Yet critical interrogation of Marshall's work has tended to focus on her novels' engagements with Africa or African American cultural practices—with the Caribbean, and specifically Barbados, serving as a critical straw man (or straw woman as the case might be). Certainly there are exceptions to this geographical focus; Cynthia James's and Carol Boyce Davies's compelling discussions of Marshall's works' Caribbean interventions are notable examples.[1] Yet surprisingly, much of the recent scholarship on the Barbadian-American author continues the trend of foregrounding African and African American connections (Cobb 2003; Smith 2008; McNeil 2009). In order to correct this critical oversight, and in the spirit of her memoir, this essay proposes to look at the writer's triangular and transnational engagements as longstanding critical practices, particularly the Caribbean-Barbadian negotiations; in so doing, it examines Marshall's most recent text *Triangular Road* alongside one of her earliest works, the short story "To Da-duh, in Memorium" (1967).

This essay also builds on one of the few, and certainly the most well-known, responses to the short story, Martin Japtok's "Sugar Cane

as History in Paule Marshall's 'To Da-duh, in Memoriam'" (2000). Japtok's analysis focuses on the use of flora and fauna in "To Da-duh." Complicating his examination of sugarcane as a symbol of colonialism, I look at representations of the black female body as a site of colonization—which as scholars like Hortense Spillers famously acknowledges in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987)—is also sometimes problematically conflated with geography and as sites ripe for conquest. Marshall's short story explores such reductive interpretations of the body and the legacy of colonialism's continued influence on black women's transnational ventures. In fact, her creative work theorizes about women's transnational exchanges well before concepts like transnationalism came into vogue. Writing at the height of the Black Arts Movement, though Caribbean writers and particularly Caribbean women writers' diasporic and transnational articulations are infrequently recognized as such, Marshall's work, like that of many black writers in the Northeast "encoded a counterhistory (or [found] an encoded counterhistory...) [and] the representation of mythic or iconic historical figures, but not much rendering of historical events" (Smethurst 2005, 77). Yet explorations of ancestral figures that might seem somewhat "ahistorical" enabled writers like Marshall, during a largely misogynistic and nationalistic moment, to create a space of productive ambiguity, while entering and building on well-established signifiers within the diegesis of literary and other artistic works, and while offering important feminist correctives and articulating new conceptions of black female identity. Constance Richards's observations elucidate and expand on the importance of such undertakings in literature; she argues, "creating, reading, and writing about literature provides an opportunity to explore ourselves and to build alliances with others. The dialectic between the self-construction of identity and the industry of literature, that is, the acts of writing, amounts to the articulation of ideology" (Richards 2000, vii). To paraphrase Richards, I examine the ways in which a self-construction of identity, through the industry of literature, amounted to an articulation of ideology that is only now revealed through relatively recent theorizations about African diasporic and transnational practices. Using the author's 2009 memoir, and the symbol of triangulation, as a frame alongside contemporary transnational theory—and particularly groundbreaking arguments like Carol Boyce Davies's articulation of the

unique position of transnational Caribbean women (1994)—I explore the ways in which this short story highlights historic and contemporary hurdles Caribbean transnational women negotiate in constructing identity. In recognizing the black female body and New World environments as discursive transnational spaces, I analyze three primary issues—black women's movement through Caribbean spaces, the attendant technologies they encounter and the ethnographic paradigms they navigate during the processes. These themes elucidate the new critical lens that Marshall's short story offers to an understanding of black women's transnational exchanges and their negotiations of colonial paradigms. In short, I examine a deployment of geographic and transnational symbols that *highlight* and *interrogate* black women's marginalization in the Americas and particularly the Caribbean—a marginalization whose deep colonial roots continues to be manifested in contemporary contexts in analogous ways.

Theoretical Grounds

Several theoretical concepts currently in vogue might well describe some of the tensions I have outlined. As James Clifford insightfully notes, "an unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretative terms now jostle and converse in an effort to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures and regions" (Clifford 1994, 303). Given the story's focus on the visit of a young girl born in the Global North (the United States), one might readily characterize her voyage as "cosmopolitanism" or "travel writing." Yet Mario Cesareo's concise distinction between these two concepts elucidates common understandings of these terms and the ways in which they fall short of explaining the tensions in which I am primarily interested. Cesareo notes, "while metropolitan travel [read cosmopolitanism] is about a confrontation with an Other, travel writing is about the domestication of this encounter through the production of otherness" (Cesareo 2001, 105). Recently, scholars such as Ifeoma Nwankwo (2005) and Carol Boyce Davies (2007) have offered more complex readings of what cosmopolitanism means for Caribbean diasporic subjects, and particularly women. Nevertheless, the connotation of Othering that scholars like Cesareo ascribe to cosmopolitanism is not my main concern in the discussion that

follows. "To Da-duh" examines African diasporic women who have a sense of affinity with the spaces to which they travel. Also, in describing travel writing as a process of domestication, Cesareo expands on descriptions of women's endeavors as tied to autobiographical and personal writing practices: oftentimes, these practices, including "letters, memoirs, chronicles, and diaries," are more closely aligned with a domestic space (Schmidt 2001, 204). I am not interested in the transnational figure's processes of domestication or Othering in the narrative. Both terms convey an imperialistic stance that is antithetical to the tensions that serve as the engine of the story in question.

Other obvious labels for exchanges such as those alluded to in the epigraph include *post-colonial*, *diasporic*, or *transnational*, and indeed, all the terms have some relevance here. Therefore, mine is a delicate balancing act. Certainly, systems of oppression and the very real legacy of the Atlantic slave trade, which complicates black women's sojourns, are central to my argument; however, neither theoretical formulations that promise *de facto* victimization, nor constructions that obscure hegemonic realities do justice to such cross-cultural exchanges. To that end, Ella Shohat's famous explanation of the difficulty in utilizing the term "post-colonial," which suggests that we are in a period after and distinct from colonization, helps identify my reluctance to deploy this term here (Shohat 1992).

The concepts *diasporic* and *transnational* also pose challenges. Scholars continue to differentiate between them, sometimes complicating and sometimes reinterpreting them, prompting new questions.[2] Khachig Tölölyan's argument that "diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment" is a useful reminder of the connection between of these two concepts (Tölölyan 1991, 245). Rather than separate them here, I periodically use the term "diaspora" and its variations. Still, I prioritize the term *transnational*, which more immediately and specifically connotes the movement of Caribbean women between the *national* boundaries Marshall's works explore. The word "transnational" also takes into account complex cultural exchanges *across* national borders, and the oppressive and constructive results of movement. That is to say, "transnational communities refers to groups... within different nations maintaining relations with kin groups... What is specific to transnational communities is their capacity and desire to maintain these contacts and the recognition

of their affinity with culturally related groups" (Gowricharn 2006, 6). This description does not offer an idealistic appeal in the hope of "transcending national exclusivity as a means of achieving utopian globalization" (Piedra 2001, 12). Such a move runs the risk of erasing cultural specificity. Instead, I subscribe to an interpretation of transnational feminism—transnational exchanges as they relate to women's lives—which "views the experience of women more broadly than do local feminisms and at the same time recognizes the limitations of a global perspective that homogenizes difference. Transnational feminism recognizes historical and political specificity and the influence of the transnational flow of capital resulting in cultural displacement, expatriation, migration, and cultural appropriation" (Richards 2000, x). Richards argues, "colonialism and imperialism have set in motion certain kinds of transnational interactions—movement of people, and with them national identities, ideologies, ethnicities, cultures—which are often played out in cultural production" (Richards 2000, x). In the discussion that follows, I recognize the "historical and political" specificity of Barbadian women. Still, "view[ing] the experience of women more broadly than do local feminisms," I acknowledge the broader implications of these women's experiences for other transnational New World black women, as black women with a "different set of historical realities"—quite often a negotiation of multiple imperial presences and varying geographies—"developed their own discourse of womanhood" (Richards 2000, x and Boyce Davies 1994, 136).

Synopsis

"To Da-duh, in Memoriam" is an autobiographical short story. It relates the tale of a young girl from Brooklyn who travels with her mother to Barbados to visit her grandmother for a short time. Although the narrative meanders between the late 1930s (the time when the child visits Barbados) and the late 1960s (the moment when the adult granddaughter shares the story), the tale is told largely from the perspective of the nine-year-old grandchild. A competition ensues between the little girl and the formidable grandmother (a figure she describes in *Triangular Road* as a "juggernaut"). Thus, most of the narrative centers on discussions between the two characters during the

grandmother's guided tour of a verdant area in Barbados. Central to their contentious word play is a debate about which space possesses the most imposing geographic symbols, New York City or Barbados. Even as the two women argue about these two locales, a third space is always present in the narrative, as the short story recounts Da-duh's resemblance to West African masks. Both characters mobilize striking visual images in their competition to defend their preferred locale, and implicitly engage and counter overt stereotypes often attributed to women in the Caribbean. The grandmother introduces the child to a giant royal palm that stares "in[to] the blinding white face of the ... sun" (103). On the other hand, the young girl invokes the Empire State building as a symbol of the superiority of the United States. At the grandmother's insistence for proof of such a building's existence, the child promises a postcard as documentary evidence of the edifice's superiority. Shortly thereafter the girl leaves Barbados and the grandmother dies without having seen the postcard. Years later the granddaughter relives her visit while in her New York City art studio.

Machinery and Transnational Women's Bodies

As is the case in many of Marshall's works, including *Praisesong for the Widow*, the ultimate site for reconnection to female ancestry is the Caribbean; alternatively, "in the spacial meaning-expansion of home, female elders are crucial links" (Boyce Davies 1994, 127). Long before Paul Gilroy's now foundational discussion of the symbolic value of ships and mechanization in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Marshall's works deploy images of machines and landscapes to historicize black women's—and particularly Caribbean women's—transnational experiences in the New World, toying with notions of fluidity and fixity. Exploring the tensions between representing Caribbean-Barbadian identity as a fluid versus fixed space, Marshall's narratives implicitly engage theoretical paradigms that continue to inform Caribbean literature and especially transnational Caribbean feminism. Below, I explore the significance of representations of various landscapes (often conflated with the black body) and the Western machines that move through them. Specifically, Marshall's "To Da-duh" analyzes a ship traversing the Caribbean Sea, blades slicing

through sugar cane and other plants, a lorry carrying various products, and airplanes bombing cane fields, as representative of Caribbean women's negotiations of the New World during past, present, and future time periods. Foregrounding a perceptive transnational narrator, this short story demonstrates the ways in which travel/movement open up a space where transnational women are able see things in new environments that local inhabitants might not.

Marshall's narrative immediately gets to the heart of black transnational women's ordeals in the New World in her allusions to a slave ship. In the first paragraph of "To Da-duh," the narrator describes arriving on a "ship that had brought [her] from New York" (Marshall 1967, 97). This ship is immediately linked to the Caribbean and an ancestral figure who "would sweep past [her] out the doorways which opened onto the sea and like Christ walk upon the water!" (97).[3] Although Marshall's short story explores a particular history—privileging a Barbadian maternal grandmother—the ship also attests to the multiplicity that characterizes Caribbean identity as always negotiating multiple cultural contexts. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues, "the Caribbean flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance" (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 4). Furthermore, Benítez-Rojo describes Caribbean life as "a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of colds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 11). This multiplicity is useful in understanding individuals whose very identity and sense of cultural connection is characterized by such "flowing past the limits of" particular seas (New York and Barbados in this case) and who continue to negotiate such spaces. Benítez-Rojo's formulation of the Caribbean Sea as epitomizing synchronicity is well established. Yet he also provides a concise way of understanding the symbolic value of ships in the Caribbean, which highlights their role in ensuring plantation society. He notes:

> It was a powerful machine of machines knowingly articulated to suit the Caribbean's geography, and its machines were geared to be able to take greatest advantage of the energy of the Gulf Stream and the region's trade winds... We can speak, nevertheless, of a Caribbean machine as important or more so than the fleet machine. This machine, this

> extraordinary machine, exists today, that is, it repeats itself continuously. It's called: the plantation. (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 8)

Marshall's narrative in "To Da-duh" (reminiscent of the tongue-in-cheek naming and subsequent critique of the cruise ship, Bianca Pride, in *Praisesong*) identifies the legacy of this extraordinary moving machine—colonialism—in the life of the transnational Barbadian woman. While Benítez-Rojo identifies the colonial project and the ways in which it was necessary for Western economic success, Gilroy identifies the ship's implications for people of African diasporic/transnational descent—the subjects of Benítez-Rojo's machines. Gilroy uses ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for interrogating the "boundaries and integrity of modern nation states" (Gilroy 1993, 4). He notes, "The image of the ship—a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons ... Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts" (Gilroy 1993, 4).

Yet why does this push and pull between the fixed and the fluid matter for black transnational women—particularly when the terms are not always necessarily mutually exclusive and when even "the binaries" one might question reveal themselves to be more complex and ever-refracting concepts? Simply (and complexly) speaking, as Spillers, Boyce Davies, and so many others have articulated in different ways, materiality, flesh, and the corporeal body of black women have been so brutalized historically and have represented such contested "sites" of colonization and conquest, that one must wrestle with black women's own reconceptualizations and interrogations of such representations (Spillers 1987; Boyce Davies 1994). In exploring "To Da-duh"'s use of concrete imagery, it becomes apparent that the ship is an obvious metaphor for black women whose wombs, as the literal carriers of enslaved individuals, were plundered in the New World. Da-duh, the Caribbean ancestor, traverses the Caribbean Sea in much the same way that slave ships traversed the oceans. The sea simultaneously represents the conduit for bodies that are sold—a site of production

much like the black woman's body—and the grave for many who perished in the Atlantic slave trade. Such concrete representations are crucial for understanding the foundational experiences of black transnational women. As Aisha Khan argues, "Western educated populations are not alone in being interested in 'epistemic validity' ... All historiographies (tutored, untutored, canonical, marginal) are so concerned" (Khan 2009, 204). Through such representations, "To Da-duh" represents the historic complexity of black women's experiences in Barbados and avoids participating in an anti-essentializing project that is so intangible that it becomes inaccessible and meaningless. Although one needs to guard against representing synchronicity to the point that nothing remains, the fluidity Benítez-Rojo invokes is also useful for conceptualizing complex transnational journeys and the multiracial progeny that were often a result of such voyages. In other words, Marshall's narrative strikes an important balance between non-Western and Western approaches, demonstrating that fluid constructions are necessary, but providing empirical evidence in the objects she invokes.

In *Triangular Road*, the haunting expansion on the symbolic value of ships and travel for transnational people in the New World sheds additional light on the above tension between the material and the ideological. She describes an afternoon spent with a friend along Virginia's James River. The author relates feeling "an odd sensation as I watch ... flotilla disappear around the final bend that leads to the city: My mind slowly divides in two, half of it attending to the pleasant conversation my friend and I are having, while the other half quietly slips away to accompany ... rafters on what's left of their trip" (44). She later notes, "my mind continues along," and she begins to describe the horror of the slave trade on and along the James River. She notes that these descriptions evoke the Edict of 1808, which halted the importation of the enslaved to the United States and resulted in the "purposeful breeding and sale of homegrown chattel" (Marshall 2009, 54). For Marshall's narrator, landscapes bear the scars of slavery, and her "divided mind" moves back and forth in time, bearing witness to present as well as past exploits. This short story allows the author to voice the experiences of historic and contemporary figures, and exploring these journeys, she makes it apparent that movement for the black transnational woman is vexed, or to use her term in *Triangular Road*, "divided." Movement

instantiates identification when individuals like the narrator of "To Da-duh" travel from a "different nation[,] maintaining relations with kin groups"; historically, among other things, movement also represented loss (Gowricharn 2006, 6). In "To Da-duh," the little girl goes to the West Indies on a ship—Gilroy and Benítez-Rojo's complex symbol—and she is able to meet and learn from a female ancestral figure. Yet, as Gilroy notes, the ship also symbolizes the atrocities of the middle passage. Movement means awareness and freedom, but it is not utopian; the voyage engenders deep sadness in both the nine-year-old grandchild in the 1930s and in the wizened author who publishes her memoir some seventy years later in 2009.

Reminders of the unstable position of black women who were violated during slavery are evident here and in earlier references to the little girl's conflation with the foreign products she accompanies on her journey from the airport to Da-duh's property. The child is described as sitting "... in the back of [a] lorry... packed in among the barrels of *ham*, flour, cornmeal and rice and the trunks of clothes that [her] mother had brought as gifts" (my emphasis, 98).[4] This description firmly locates the traveling granddaughter between multiple temporal and colonial spaces. Most obvious, of course, is her implicit categorization as a commodity, much as one would catalogue enslaved women and subject them to labor.[5] This moment is reminiscent of the scene in *Triangular Road*, cited in the epigraph, in which "'twenty-and-odd negroes' at Point Comfort, Jamestown, Virginia ... had been exchanged for so many sacks of meal and *salted meat*" (my emphases, Marshall 2009, 110–11). The reference to "meat" and "meal" suggests enslaved individuals' conflation with animals that are consumed, when linked to the women in question, such references also evoke the particularly inimical effects for women who were historically bartered and in danger of sexual assault.

In addition, readers are reminded of a twentieth-century world where Barbadian women travel abroad and ship life-sustaining foreign wares to relatives in the Caribbean. Since it is easier for women to find domestic jobs during this period, these individuals become self-identified commodities and mobilizers of goods and services.[6] Despite its obvious limiting connotations, an increased level of agency is also possible as diasporic women migrate to foreign spaces and become breadwinners, thereby

reimagining gender roles where men are primary providers. Furthermore, the mothers' transporting of "produce" demonstrates a level of female agency and autonomy and the sanctioning of such practices within the community in general. This image serves as a complex socio-historical signifier, vacillating between the *legacies* of colonialism and reminding the reader of *contemporary* and tangible colonizing agendas that might also accompany transnational subjects. Though images of food in the lorry serve as a complex symbol that reminds readers of women's role in a domestic sphere as traditional preparers of food, riding in the vehicle, these transnational figures are removed from a domestic space—another important counter to patriarchal constructions.

As I suggest above, such narrative symbols also invite an interrogation of the implications of present-day transnational excursions and exchanges. In addition to historical allusions, the reference in the passage to the mother's purchases and the image of the modern "lorry" recontextualize this journey as a representation of neo-colonialism through tourism. At this point in the narrative, the little girl, for all her cultural curiosity, is as uninvolved in the life of the island as one of the inanimate objects she accompanies, and it is difficult to decipher whether or not she rejects the association with slavery or dons the oblivious mask of the tourist. As Richards observes, "a transnational perspective seems appropriate in the aftermath of colonialism and in light of the kind of imperial power, without the benefit of colonies or former colonies, that the United States currently wields globally" (Richards 2000, x).

Landscape, Cityscape, and Black Women's Bodily Resistance and Reconciliation

As in *Triangular Road* where geography dramatically evokes the past, in "To Da-duh" the narrator notes, "I suddenly feared that we were journeying, unaware ... toward some *dangerous* place where the canes, grown as high and thick as a forest, would *close in on us* and *run us through* with their stiletto blades. I longed then for the familiar: for the street in Brooklyn where I lived... for the game of tag under the chestnut tree..." (my emphases, 99). The author refers frequently to the cane fields; in fact, they appear more

often throughout the narrative than any other form of vegetation. Japtok argues:

> the oppressive presence of the canes, the mortal danger they metaphorically pose here, points, of course, to the way in which sugarcane was cultivated in Barbados, and in the Americas in general, during much of its agricultural history—with the brutal exploitation of African slave labor, an exploitation so relentless that it necessitated a constant influx of newly enslaved individuals merely to outmatch death rates. (Japtok 2000, 477)

Somehow, the little girl senses this "mortal danger" and expresses a desire to leave (Japtok 2000, 477). Carole Boyce Davies addresses this reaction as she states, "cane fields are so wedded to Caribbean slavery and oppression of Africans, the child's rejection of this is an important departure from that particular experience and history" (Davies 1994, 117–18). The young girl's resistance to the space then becomes more understandable; not only does she oppose the foreign land/homeland, but also what she perceives as a more tangible and immediate reference to a brutal past for Barbadian women. The sexual savagery visited upon enslaved women who were subjected to patriarchal dominance is manifested in the phallic "stiletto blades" that might "run through" individuals. The reference to danger is telling, as is the arbitrary nature of such violence, and the physical threat—the "closing in" on the female bodies being unwillingly and suddenly "penetrated." In the image of sliced crops, the speaker highlights phallic blades (swords) that lacerate black female bodies.

Yet the narrative's contributions do not stop with such familiar paradigms. Japtok's observation that sugarcane production "necessitated a constant influx of new slaves merely to outmatch death rates" alludes to the particularly heinous nature of slavery in the Caribbean (Japtok 2000, 477). Unlike American slavers' reliance on the "purposeful breeding and sale of homegrown chattel," Caribbean slavers relied more heavily on the importation of African individuals to replace those who were brutally murdered or worked to death (Marshall 2009, 54). Although the allusions to sexual violence are applicable in both national contexts, the description of the divided transnational figure in *Triangular Road* and the contrast to American and Caribbean enslavement practices indicate differences in the experiences of black enslaved women in the Caribbean and the United States.

Reminiscent of the groundbreaking interrogations of the simultaneous and overlapping vectors of race, class, and gender of transnational exchanges in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and *Praisesong*, the cane fields also serve as an apt symbol to question gender and class binaries and commoditization of black colonial women. This Western symbol—the sword—occupies a different cultural and class register than a machete, for example, dramatizing the racial, classed, and gendered differences that account for these atrocities. Its steel blade also links it semiotically to the other mechanical symbols that move—the ship, the lorry and the airplanes (which similarly slice through the cane fields when Da-duh dies). These objects also mark class differences between black transnational women, as working-class island dwellers ride lorries, and many of their Western-dwelling counterparts travel in ships and planes.

Given the complex tensions associated with Caribbean spaces, one wonders what the safe harbors are for these individuals. This question is especially relevant as it becomes apparent that the protagonist's identity is not contained in the United States, but dependent on an understanding of peoples in other locations. As Richard Gowricharn asserts, transnationalism "refers to migrants who travel back and forth between countries, a category of short term migrants, and people who are in different ways actively involved with their homeland" (Gowricharn 2006, 7). Gowricharn also argues that "a different form of transnational bond consists of those migrants who maintain contacts with the home country, but remain at a distance... They might remain concerned with 'home,' although the bonds with the home country erode" (2006, 7). Such alliances are central for self-knowledge. Yet Gowricharn's notion of home requires further interrogation when one examines black women's journeys. In the discussion that follows, I complicate this relationship with home, which is generally understood in African diasporic criticism as a troubled space, and particularly so for black women (Davies 1994).

Both characters in "To Da-duh" use geographic iconography to argue for the validity of their respective homes, and the women thus become associated with contrasting images; the grandmother aligns herself with the anthropomorphic royal palm, and the child invokes the satirized Empire State Building. As I have noted, interventions like Japtok's essay "Sugar Cane as History" (2000) analyze the significance of various plants and

fixtures in evoking colonialism in the narrative, but overlook the gendered implications of these images. Yet as the women mobilize phallic and other symbols, an analysis of their larger significance is crucial for understanding the story's subversive strategies, including their complication of gendered notions of home and belonging.

Given the pair's invocation of phallic symbols—the royal palm tree and the Empire State Building—one might imagine that the narrator privileges a male space in her depictions of home. However, the use of a palm tree to symbolize the superiority of Caribbean society is already a problematic and compromised argument since planters historically used royal palms to demarcate the boundaries of Barbadian plantations and given that its very name became synonymous with and evocative of an imperial presence. Furthermore, various Caribbean writers, including Barbadian author George Lamming in his groundbreaking novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, popularly satirize royal palms and Barbadians' problematic and mindless loyalty to Great Britain during the early to mid-twentieth century. Rather than epitomize local Caribbean dominance, as Da-duh imagines, it is a well-established and ridiculed hallmark of Western supremacy. Notably, the Empire State Building was humorously referred to as the "The Empty State Building" during the 1930s, the time of the child's visit. The building was completed during the Great Depression and many offices remained unrented for over two decades. Despite its popularity as the tallest building in the world, the edifice was a prominent symbol of economic hardship and waste. Thus, the popular moniker humorously questions the potency of this symbol of empire, rendering it visually formidable, though in practice impotent. The use of phallic symbols, both with titles that directly allude to the precise empires most closely related to the primary homes of their respective speakers—one colonial, the other neo-colonial—begs for further interrogation. The masters of these transnational women's households are metaphorically unmanned in the most primal ways. Though these women mobilize phallic symbols, the specific choices poignantly and pointedly—no pun intended—question rather than exalt women's relationship to these specific patriarchal and imperial spaces. In other words, dominant, patriarchal, Western emblems and

conceptions of home fall short, revealing their inappropriateness for representing these transnational black women's lives across generations. There is a potential cliché in the child aligning the ancestor with the Global South and the natural world, and aligning the child (read present and future) with the Global North and industrialization. Yet more importantly, the narrator's strategic insertion of both genders and the prioritization of female protagonists' points of view are foregrounded, and the story simultaneously reimagines histories as shared [her]stories, while countering dominant stereotypes, challenging hackneyed notions of a "mother land," and offering evidence of black women's resistance strategies in the New World.

The gesture of promising to send postcard renditions risks participating in naturalizing and essentializing discourses. That is to say, the grandmother's "rewriting" of home seems to be inscribed on the very trees—repositioning home as a lived experience, as a vital space with which one can engage and negotiate to one's own liking, rather than a hazardous mechanical colonial machine (read the ship and plantation industry) or an imperial state (read the empty Empire State Building) are also productive in reimagining material worlds, which were historically construed, constructed, and understood along patriarchal lines. Furthermore, for Da-duh, it is a lived inscription that involves a personal journey rather than the impersonal contact her partially Westernized granddaughter proposes. In addition to depicting the core of Da-duh's teaching and in contrast to the phallic symbol, the "almost impenetrable" area that the grandmother evokes also symbolizes the very height of emotional reconnection to a "homeland," the difficulty in attaining that connection, and the useful challenges in articulating that space. The earth is jutting and unwelcoming, but it serves as the uneven, important grounds for discourse. Boyce Davies' assertion that "the rewriting of home becomes a critical link in the articulation of identity" for diasporic women writers is helpful in understanding such dynamics (Davies 1994, 115). Vastly different from the clichéd domestic space or "motherland" as a location for female bonding, the short story depicts the women's competition as an esoteric space of relation that allows them to communicate candidly and in complex ways, asking questions about and better understanding their identity.

Moving away from such tensions, the child prepares to leave Barbados and promises her grandmother a postcard of the imposing Empire State Building. Yet, in introducing a binary where the natural and mechanical worlds are seemingly diametrically evoked, what does the narrative accomplish? One can appreciate the girl's recognition and reconceptualization of a symbol of tourism, the postcard, which has historically fixed the Caribbean—and especially its female inhabitants—as commoditized entities. Of course, one of the primary methods for marketing the Caribbean (and in this case Barbados) as an idyllic getaway was and is through the provocative use of language and images. Yet instead of the commoditization of the archipelago's landscape or its inhabitants, these women use inversion to propose an analogous treatment of the United States as subject to neo-colonialism—they propose sending an image of an iconic phallic symbol from the Global North to Barbados for the black woman's appraisal. Stereotypes of paradise and its inhabitants as ripe for Western consumption are well established. Yet the little girl reimagines the *subjects* of consumption, reversing the hierarchical order. In addition, the transnational child's choice of the postcard signals the artificiality of recording and commoditizing the experience of African diasporic individuals. In "To Da-duh," readers are made aware of a slippage between the image produced (a photograph of a man-made structure) and the lived vital space that elicits a visceral response. The story suggests that the child's New York existence represents a figurative and literal distancing from these cultural legacies that mechanical (read colonial) productions like the photograph fail to approximate.

This short story also marks a generational shift in the child who embraces this mechanical disruptive world. The narrator describes airplanes bombing the cane fields before the postcard arrives. This scene offers a complex interpretation of colonialism's legacy for black transnational women. I have noted numerous ways in which black women's bodies have been problematically aligned with landscape, its attendant symbols, and the means of traversing landscape. Scholars like Ian Strachan in *Paradise and Plantation*

also describe the ways in which Caribbean landscape and Caribbean women, especially in countries like Barbados and Jamaica, two of the most popular tourist sites in the Caribbean, continue to be hypersexualized and imagined as spaces ripe for neo-colonial consumption via tourism (Strachan 2002). Therefore, one can imagine the assault on the landscape/body as the influx of tourism in Barbados in the 1960s (represented in the destructive airplanes), and the resulting reductive descriptions of the island and its inhabitants that ensue. The bombing of the cane fields that the narrator describes also represents the destruction of a key symbol for the plantocracy. On the other hand, for better or worse, the crop has become integral to the island's survival and inhabitants like the grandmother identify with and are problematically linked to it and other symbols of colonialism. Its destruction, therefore, also symbolizes threat to the ancestral figure. Yet at the end of the story, even once she migrates, the granddaughter sustains her ancestral connection by continuing to paint pictures of the sugarcanes she saw as a child; that is to say, by literally and figuratively reimagining such symbols. The survival of this image also helps demonstrate the ways in which "the Caribbean flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance" (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 4). In other words, despite distance and movement, the female transnational figure carries and re-records her cultural legacy.

Returning the Ethnographic Gaze

What do these representations of the black female body as discursive space accomplish? The narrative responds to one of the central dilemmas that numerous Caribbean scholars address—the lack of historic cultural evidence for interrogation. Thus the physical body, like the physical landscape, becomes a crucial site for learning about black women's experiences in the New World. Aisha Khan elaborates on this "absence of ruins" arguing that "fundamentally what is at issue here is the region's quantity and quality of culture: how much was allegedly lost by diasporic populations in the Americas" (Khan 2009, 201). She notes,

> the premise of loss, [which] attempts to typify the Caribbean as a particular kind of place in the world—exemplified, for example, by

> such imagery as amnesia, denial, negative hallucination, absent ruins, and fragments—is not simply poetic license. It is a poetic license that essentializes the Caribbean as a site of loss and a site of struggle against that loss, and permeates the creolization concept with shifting discourses of celebration and lament: lament over loss and celebration of creative resistance. (Khan 2009, 201)

Yet across generations, the short story gives us "fragments of epic memory" (to borrow the title of Derek Walcott's famous essay).[7] That is to say, the narrative provides fragments of history that focus on the region and its most marginalized subject—the black woman—not as simply "a site of loss and a site of struggle against that loss" but as a figure of epic proportions.

Recognizing that an appraisal of cultural evidence, embodied or otherwise, was historically the province of Western ethnographers, the narrator plays with an ethnographic gaze that historically maligned black women in the New World and which offered stereotypes as interpretation of these individuals. Instead, though this exchange depicts ideological boundary crossings, the author represents the grandmother as embodying a specific place. Given "all historiographies'" interest in "epistemic validity" this move gives legitimacy to new interpretations of black transnational female figures (Khan 2009, 204). Certainly, the references to Da-duh as resembling a Benin mask are general. Still, she is from a particular region in Africa, rendering Da-duh's body empirical, embodied evidence of these individuals' transnational journeys as well as their ancestral lineage. Furthermore, even this level of specificity—knowledge of one's ancestral country—is rare for many African diasporic individuals. The narrative plays on the well-known sentiment that one needs to know one's past in order to know one's self, and it is literalized here. When the narrator identifies Da-duh's Benin ancestry, she also identifies her own Benin heritage. Therefore, when the child speaks for the grandmother, she speaks for herself and an entire Barbadian and diasporic community—a groundbreaking and nuanced formulation for a work completed some fifty years ago.

As primary characters in the story are introduced, the narrative deploys the ethnographic gaze to elucidate the process of transnational women's growing understanding of selfhood. In describing the granddaughter, she notes "her eyes were alive... with a sharp *light* that flicked out of the

dim—clouded—*depths*" (my emphases, 97). In addition to alluding to the all-consuming Western gaze of the nineteenth century, the author also alludes to the all-knowing tourist gaze that emerges in the twentieth century. Ostensibly, the story is set in a period when colonialism is a thing of the past, yet as with the image of the packed lorry, the short story reminds readers of Westerners' neo-colonial consumption of the Caribbean. She reimagines the empty signifier that the archipelago has become in carnivorous Western tourist discourses—a "dim" place open to and ripe for "enlightened" Western cooptation—and presents instead a culturally dynamic location. Also, in the above exchange, it is Da-duh who is literally en*light*ened and who possesses an empowered gaze. And as the child reads knowledge in her grandmother's eyes, the author again alludes to a unique communicative space that exists between granddaughter and grandmother.

Of course this transnational interplay differs from an ethnographic gaze because it represents an exchange. Rather than one external, privileged subject observing and benefiting from the interaction, the short story depicts a reciprocal relationship, as the Caribbean woman looks back at her transnational granddaughter. Further refracting and dismantling binaries, the author revises the traditional agents of speculation from male to female and "Western" to "non-Western." Of course one of the most productive reconceptualizations, which also pushes beyond these familiar binaries, is the complex confrontation across diasporic lines where the interactions of these specific characters signal communication within African, Barbadian, and American contexts. Thus, though the ominous references to the "dim clouded depths" point to a legacy of colonialism, for the little girl, Da-duh is a physical conduit to, and provides epistemic validity for, knowledge about black female selfhood.

Countering a problematic ethnographic gaze, the story also communicates what the transnational black woman sees when she encounters black women's bodies in new environments—positive and nuanced images. The transnational girl is better able to read signifiers that have historically gone unexplored or been misrepresented. The images the narrator describes are a reminder that "colonialism and imperialism have set in motion certain kinds of transnational interactions—movement of people, and with them national identities, ideologies, ethnicities, cultures—which are often played out in

cultural production" (Richards 2000, x). The narrator's reading of the body invokes two African diasporic symbols, two forms of "cultural production"—that of masking and oral culture. For the narrator, these women's bodies testify generations later to complex cultural exchanges in the Americas. As Africans could not carry artifacts with them across the Middle Passage, Da-duh represents a valuable, literalized, oral form. Yet as her conflation with these objects seemingly marks her body as indisputable evidence of the African past, one wonders whether the narrative teeters on essentializing or whether such revisions allow the historically maligned body to be reimagined. The generalized Benin mask represents a productive ambiguity, solidifying the grandmother's role as embodied ancestral figure on one hand and, on the other hand, reminding readers that the mythical and the spiritual are indecipherable from daily life in African cosmology. In both scenarios the female ancestral figure is literally accorded a place in Barbadian history. Equally important, disrupting, but also moving beyond Western paradigms, it is her own story that Da-duh shares.

Addressing physical representations of black women, Marshall's narrative simultaneously identifies Western visitors' tendency to make specimens of the island's inhabitants—be that through tourism or pseudo-scientific studies—and honors unacknowledged ancestral women. Unlike other islands like Jamaica where a black heroine like Nanny (albeit a singular case) can receive considerable national attention and achieve iconic status, Barbados pays less attention to national heroines—the one notable exception being periodic references to Sarah Ann Gill. Put another way, the narrative gives voice to historically silenced black ancestral women and calls to the fore these individuals' contributions to culture, community, family, and even narrative forms. Inverting and redirecting the gaze, the transnational figure uses patriarchal ethnographic tools to firmly construct a level of stability and secure a space of identification for the Barbadian woman and the twice diasporized African diasporic community. In this way, the author gives new life to female figures who have been virtually erased from or problematically represented in historical records.

In a detailed appraisal of her grandmother, and an insightful recognition of Da-duh's ancestral and spiritual boundary crossings, the narrator notes, "perhaps she was both, both child and woman, darkness and light, *past*

and present, life and death—all the opposites contained and reconciled in her" (97). Such stark contrasts also evoke images of Eshu, the semi-deity and trickster, who Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989), Heather Russell (2009), and numerous other scholars describe as god of the crossroads. The Yoruba semi-deity is embodied in Da-duh who appropriately leads the child "at this crossroads in her life, to those ancestors whose spirits she has neglected…" (Busia 1989, 204). The girl describes the grandmother as a complex transnational symbol who navigates time and space in peculiar ways. She notes that Da-duh wears "an ugly-rolled brim brown felt hat" with a "long severe old-fashioned white dress …, which brought the sense of a *past that was still alive into the bustling present*" (97, my emphasis). The latter part of this description evokes the protean trickster who navigates multiple spaces, and the hat is a reminder of one of the most famous stories of Eshu wearing a hat with a different color on either side (evoked here in the brown and white colors), which leaves viewers on either side of him/her at odds. Russell expands on this characteristic noting, "Eshu-Elegbara … sometimes "wears" the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittily insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgment" (Thompson quoted in Russell, 2009 1).[8] Eshu also embodies duality, uncertainty, and indeterminacy, and in this larger context of pointed interrogations of colonial relationships, the grandmother's brown and white hat also evokes a colonial relationship that brown and white individuals must negotiate. Of course the author's choice of a woman trickster also problematizes and resists colonialism's patriarchal biases and African diasporic gender paradigms that represent tricksters and disruptive cultural icons like Eshu as men. In this way, Marshall's narratives not only forcefully insert the nameless ancestral women—the Da-duhs of the Caribbean—into the historical records, but also recognize their place in myth, folklore, and other such cultural forms.

Conclusion

Paying close attention to both representations of black female bodies and the spaces and politics they have negotiated in the New World,

"To Da-duh" explores challenges for black transnational women and reworks problematic representational paradigms. Still, despite questioning colonialism, the tensions that the short story dramatizes are not strictly *between* groups but within communities, and the narrative's explorations offer a complex space of intra-group signaling. Well before the interventions of numerous Third World feminist or "womanist" critics (Walker 1983), Marshall's short story embarks on an important, though largely unrecognized, analysis of unique obstacles and triumphs of Third World transnational women. This oversight is somewhat surprising, in light of echoes of many of these paradigms in several of the author's other narratives. In examining the story's representation and questioning of women *in* Barbadian landscapes and *as* Barbadian spaces once subject to conquest, one can trace this early theorization of the experiences of transnational Caribbean women in Marshall's larger creative oeuvre. Still, rather than explicitly theorizing about the particular conditions of these individuals, her narratives introduce unique diasporic and transnational paradigms for consideration, while offering important critical intervention in Caribbean and transnational feminist studies. Her analyses of various technologies and landscapes, and cultural legacies aligned with the body, highlight the complex strategies necessary for diasporic women's self-assertion in sites where colonialism continues to reign. Yet Marshall's work does not simply delineate the oversights of Western feminist discourse or highlight binaries and oversights that resulted from colonialism. They also foreground these women's survival strategies and their means of asserting agency while they create unique female spaces of communication. Finally, in the representation of Third World women, stories like "To Da-duh" remind readers that these individuals are not always already definable, and that one needs to look beyond mainstream feminist, transnational and even Caribbean critical paradigms—or sometimes combine and interweave such discourses—in attempting to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of transnational Caribbean women.

Notes

1. See, for example, James 2001.
2. For example, Ruben Gowricharn provides much needed descriptions of diasporic and transnational communities, but the distinction he offers collapses

onto itself. Gowricharn states: "While the concept of diaspora presupposes *unity—one* people *dispersed* all over the globe—the concept of transnational communities refers to groups (families or linguistic, political, regional, and religious groups) within different nations maintaining relations with kin groups (my emphases, Gowricharn 2006, 6). Immediately after noting the "unity" of the "one diasporic people" he notes that they are dispersed. Yet it seems logical that this dispersion is accompanied by an immersion of different cultures that is also accompanied by shifts in the community's "oneness." Brent Edwards famously and compellingly makes an argument for the constitutive differences and similarities that describe African diasporic communities in *The Practice of Diaspora* (Edwards 2003).

3. "To Da-duh" offers ample foreshadowing for Marshall's later novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. The ancestral figure appears in numerous of her works, perhaps most vividly as Avatara Johnson in *Praisesong*. Avatara "Avery" Johnson's name represents the ancestor as a deity in human form, much like the grandmother in "To Da-Duh." Among other things, both narratives also describe African diasporic figures who walk on water; they invoke Eshu the trickster figure; and both works represent ships in complex ways.
4. This moment echoes a similar list and critique of the role of women during slavery in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Here, the protagonist divides the spoils of war: "horses, cows, mules, camels, women, wine and jewelry, and household vessels of gold and silver" with women of course conveniently indistinguishable from the other products/booty (Hurston 1939, 212).
5. The multiple connotations of this term—involving both manual labor and birthing processes—are useful for understanding the unique circumstances surrounding these individuals.
6. For a more detailed exploration of the historical origins of this phenomenon, see Richardson 1997. Such representations of female Caribbean migrants are also well documented in works like C. L. R. James' foundational *Minty Alley*, which showcases Caribbean life and interrogates black female transnational movement during the period of the story's setting, the 1930s.
7. Khan similarly borrows from Walcott's essay "Fragments of Epic Memory" and uses the term "shipwreck fragments," which is also relevant for this discussion when one considers Marshall's use of the ship as a symbol of transnationalism (Khan 2009, 201).
8. This trickster figure has many names, depending on African diasporic location, including Eleda, Elegba, Eleggua, Eshu, Eshu-Elegbara, Esu, Exu, and Legba. Acknowledging this figure's appellation in Yoruba custom, one of the traditions in which the story of the hat appears and one of the areas that acknowledge Eshu's multiplicity (and which Marshall references in the story), my preferred name is Eshu.

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