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Cover Page Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the thoughtful feedback and criticism offered by the audience at the College Language Association, where a version of this article was presented.

In 2013, on a hot June day in Sanford, Florida, nineteen-year-old Rachel Jeantel took the stand to testify on behalf of her slain friend, Trayvon Martin. More than a year had passed since the evening George Zimmerman initiated an exchange that ultimately led to Martin's death. Having been the only person to speak to Martin in the moments before he was fatally shot by Zimmerman, Jeantel was regarded as the "star witness" by all sides. What she would go on to say on the witness stand would be pivotal in determining whether George Zimmerman did indeed act lawfully on that night. Yet it was "mostly the *style* – not necessarily the substance – of her testimony that fueled the public conversation" (Muller, emphasis added) regarding her testimony. Indeed, the aftermath of her testimony and the public's response to it would take on a life of its own. Destroying the credibility of the only person who could speak for Martin was arguably what led the jury to find George Zimmerman innocent of all charges in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. The act of *speaking* for Martin in and of itself is of particular concern here, as it invites us to consider the politicized and racialized implications of the speaker's voice and style of communication.

Jeantel was immediately marked as inarticulate, uneducated, and thereby not credible during her two days on the witness stand. She was branded as "a flawed witness" (qtd. in Wilstein) in the news media directly as a result of her speech. One member of the jury offered patronizing sympathy: "I didn't think it was very credible...but I felt very sorry for her. I think she felt *inadequate* toward everyone because of her education and her *communication* skills" (qtd. in Jeantel, emphasis added). The level to which Jeantel was deemed believable did not rest upon her own truth, but rather the extent to which she conformed to the expectations of the jury. Another juror reinforced the notion that Jeantel was indeed an outsider, noting that "a lot of times she was using phrases I had never heard before" (Jeantel). Quite simply, as one legal expert put it, "every time she opens her mouth, her credibility gets chipped away" (qtd. in Wilstein). Jeantel's word choices and style of speech were met with disapproval and dismissal from a jury of her peers.

Thus, Jeantel's testimony began another trial: that of her word. Her word, in this context, was not so much a question of content, but of an ontological blackness that put her very integrity in question. Rachel Jeantel was not merely stepping on a witness stand; rather, she was stepping into a centuries-old paradigm that delegitimized her, "a large, dark-skinned teenage girl, whose language was peppered with slang" (Carlin 452). If we follow the late Amiri Baraka's observation that "Speech is the effective form of a culture" (62), Jeantel was handicapped from the start. Even the conservative news pundit Geraldo Rivera conceded that "the five white ladies on [the] Zimmerman trial jury" would "probably" not find her to be a "sincere credible witness" (Rivera). Jeantel's was, in the words of linguist John Baugh, "Speaking While Black"; her race negatively

affected how she was perceived.¹ She was, as Carlin argues, occupying “a white space” that viewed her as an other (452).

For Jeantel, for Martin, and for people of African descent in white spaces, speech has historically been a source of policing.² Yet, on the other side of this tragedy exists a robust tradition of black speakers, thinkers, and writers who have embraced the uniqueness of orality across the African diaspora. It is here that we can begin to appreciate the contributions and enduring relevance of Paule Marshall, whose preoccupation with language as a space for celebrating culture and challenging hegemony speaks directly to this historical moment.

Marshall, I argue, embraces the very aspects that maligned Rachel Jeantel and turns them on their head. Namely, Marshall intentionally manipulates voice and language as a means for affirmation and resistance within black communities, with specific attention to Bajan and African American spaces. Marshall engages in a speech-driven challenging of discourses, discourses that to this day render black speakers silent. To illustrate this, I focus specifically on her first two novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969) to highlight the significance of Marshall’s stylized use of her characters’ voices, including how, when, and where those voices are deployed. Specifically, I focus on Marshall’s own frameworks regarding the transformative potential of language and examine their implementation in each of her first two novels. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, I focus on Marshall’s intentional utilization of the speech patterns of African American and Bajan Creole features to augment generational struggles of acculturation. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* I focus on Merle Kinbona’s uncensored, unfettered speech as a challenge to the normative Western values of decorum and presentation, which ultimately maligned Rachel Jeantel in the public eye. In both works, Marshall purposefully emphasizes the exalted place that orators have held in the African diaspora to show language as a site of possibility for coping with and even subverting power structures. And, as the outcome of *The State of Florida v. George Zimmerman* makes clear, the gravity of how (black) speakers are received has had grave consequences in the recent and distant past, making her work relevant to readers of her work in the present. Before examining Marshall’s texts, however, a brief note on how language and speech will be considered within the confines of this argument is necessary.

¹ Recent studies have examined the significant role of race and speech in the reception of Rachel Jeantel. See Grace Sullivan’s “In Your Own Words: Investigating Voice, Intertextuality, and Credibility of Rachel Jeantel in the George Zimmerman Trial” (2015), Montré Carodine’s “Contemporary Issues in Critical Race Theory: The implications of race as character evidence in recent high-profile cases” (2014), and Mikah Thompson, *Blackness as Character Evidence* (2015).

² For an overview of cases where (mis)readings of vernacular language has affected the outcome of legal proceedings, see John Rickford’s “Language and Linguistics on Trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and other Vernacular Speakers) in the Courtroom and Beyond.” (2016)

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

As "language" is a loaded term that is wrought with tension in political/judicial spaces as well as academic spaces, this argument is primarily concerned with Marshall's usage of voice as it relates to resistance. This treatment of voice is conceptualized primarily through Marshall's *own* professed intentions as a tribute to her forbears, a point to be revisited later. Marshall's diasporic identity as a first-generation US citizen who sought to pay homage to her Bajan heritage necessarily involves a level of linguistic considerations for this argument, though these are not its primary concerns.

As such, this article recognizes African American Vernacular English (hereafter AAVE) and Bajan Creole as distinct entities, just as Marshall does. Also relevant to the argument, however, are the linguistic intersections of the two. In *African American Vernacular English* (1999), John Rickford points to research that suggests there are undeniable common roots in Bajan pidgin and Creole languages. Despite the presence of features from Irish indentured servants in parts of the Caribbean and varying proportions of white populations in proximity to black populations in the North American colonies, he notes, "there can be absolutely no doubt that *some* pidgin/creole speech—whether home-grown or imported—was an element in the formative stage of African American English" (249). He attributes this to "the haunting similarities with Caribbean Creole English which we find in AAVE even today" (249), including usage of preverbal markers ("be," "bin") and double negative usage.

Thus, in considering the performative elements of "voice," this article also focuses on well-documented practices of signifyin', toasting, and command of the oral tradition by griots, speakers, and orators. These linkages are drawn upon by Marshall, I contend, to suggest shared experiences and challenges that inform a cultural and political bond within the African diaspora. To be clear, this is not to suggest that all experiences within the African diaspora's rich cultures are interchangeable; rather, this article focuses on intersections of communicative practice and politics while also highlighting Marshall's overall project of celebrating the distinct complex voices that make up diasporic communities, particularly in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

Dorothy Hamer Denniston identifies several essential components in the speech of Marshall's Bajan characters that permeates *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. These components are still consistent with Bajan Creole language patterns spoken today, while also sharing features with AAVE. Dennison's notes the use of hyperbole, metaphor, idiom, and double-adjectives, and oppositional speech (10-11) at the core of Marshall's usage in her texts. One specific pairing, "beautiful-ugly," is of particular thematic resonance throughout Marshall's novels. In

Marshall's own words, it is the critical beginning point to understanding the diverse experiences in the African diaspora (Graulich and Sisco 298).

SPEECH, SPACE, AND "THE BEAUTIFUL UGLY"

For Marshall, the term "beautiful/ugly" provides a dialectical framework that rejects polemical simplicity. It is an embrace of the ostensibly contradictory and often entropic forces that constitute wholeness, be it within an individual or of a community. True to her own experience, Marshall acknowledges an internal twoness while also recognizing that which cannot be reconciled. In her own words, she observes:

There was always [in my life] this duality, this sense of the beautiful/ugly. The world as a complex creation. It's a very very African view of reality and perhaps my life reflects this principle. I'm this person who is of these two cultures, of two very complex traditions. (qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 298)

"Beautiful/ugly" frees Marshall from restrictive uplift imperatives, giving her flexibility to play with convention and expectation while also drawing upon non-Western worldviews in her writing. One example of the "beautiful/ugly" is how she deals with the tension of growing up as the child of Bajan parents in Brooklyn, as finding her place within two complex traditions.

Like black women writers before and after her, Marshall recognized the need to write herself into a literature and a history that systematically excluded her. In reflecting upon the dearth of black voices available to her during her youth in the 1930s and '40s, she notes:

I sensed something missing. I couldn't quite define what it was, until one day I came across the work of the black poet Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar. And it came to me: I never saw myself or anyone *in* my community or my community reflected in any of these books that I read and loved. I was not present. I'm not talking about myself, but about the collective me. I was simply not present in the literature. (qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 291)

She lamented the lack of books by black writers available at the Macon Street branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, which offered "no sense that there had been the Harlem Renaissance or that Richard Wright at that point was extremely popular" (Pettis and Marshall 120). She was "unaware" of Zora Neale Hurston,

whose work would not be resurrected by Alice Walker for another quarter century (120). The work of writers from other parts of the African diaspora shared a similar if not worse fate in terms of availability for the young Marshall. Miffed by the reality that "Black writers weren't well known, and you were not encouraged to read them," (qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 291) Marshall directed her pen to portraying "the collective me" (291) by creating the world she knew around her, its sights, and, most relevant to this argument, its sounds, possibilities, and challenges. Yet Marshall's relationship with language warrants scrutiny given her own professed conflicted feelings of being born in the United States and having Bajan parents. Some insight may be gleaned from the opening of her first novel, which features the similarly torn Selina Boyce.

Despite her professed embrace of two traditions, Marshall, by own admission, struggled with a sense of place within both. During the "torture" of girlhood, Marshall admits that she "went through a whole period of rejecting" her West Indian heritage so as not be ridiculed for her accent (Marshall qtd. in Denniston 9). Not surprisingly then, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* thematically tackles this tension. In this conversation between father and daughter, Selina's father Deighton questions her generation's choices of leisure activity, finding occasion to reminisce on those of his own childhood:

"I don know what wanna New York children does find in a movie [...]. Sitting up in a dark place when the sun-shining bright-bright outside."

[...]

"I don't see what you could do that's better than the movies."

"*How you mean?* You think people din make sport before there was movie? Come Sat'day, when we was boys coming up, we would get piece of stick and a lime and a big stone and play cricket. If we had a little change in we pocket we would pick up weself and go up Kensington Field to football."

"What else?"

"*How you mean?* I's a person live in town and always had plenty to do. I not like yuh mother and the 'mounts of Bajan that come from down some gully or up some hill behind God back and ain use to nothing. 'Pon a Sat'day I would walk 'bout town like I was a full-full man. All up Broad Street and Swan like I did own the damn place."

"What else?"

"*How you mean?*"

"Didja play any games?"

“Game? How you mean? Tha’s all we did. Rolling the roller and cork-sticking...” (Marshall 9-10, emphasis added).

The first extensive dialogue in the novel, this exchange between Deighton and Selina foregrounds several central essential themes: the layered significance of Deighton’s inquiry, “how you mean?”; the intentional inclusion of Bajan Creole in Deighton’s speech to signal difference and distance between generations and cultures; and the early establishment of language as refuge. Marshall’s repetition of the phrase, “How you mean?” symbolically sets the stage for Selina’s growth for the entirety of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Its implications raise a more important question at the heart of the world Marshall imagines: how can Selina, the daughter of West Indian immigrants adjusting to life in the United States, *create meaning in* “this man world”? (Or, as her mother Silla would often remark, “this white man world.”) The phrase invites the reader to consider how speakers are understood as well as implications of how speakers choose to present themselves.

It is no coincidence that the exchange between father and daughter hearkens back into Deighton’s beautiful/ugly past. Marshall uses Deighton’s voice, presented at the outset of the novel, to foreground the central tension he would contend with until his death: his yearning to return to Barbados. Deighton serves as “the avatar of the islands,” an emblem of life in Barbados who stands in stark contrast to the country and community he finds himself in for most of the novel (Hathaway 94). In the exchange with Selina, he points to specific cultural practices (cricket, soccer) popular in Barbados and not the United States. He also points to Selina’s enjoyment of a traditional American pastime, the movies, which he spatially marks and critiques as something done by “New York children.” His childhood, spent outside playing makeshift games, is a world apart from that of his very own daughter. Yet despite the seemingly irreconcilable distance between what seems like a gulf of experience between the two generations, Marshall embraces the “beautiful/ugly” in her simultaneous depiction of closeness between father and daughter. Marshall celebrates Deighton’s nostalgia through her careful rendering of it in Bajan Creole. *How* Deighton articulates himself is just as important as the content he presents.

Marshall was indeed intentional in her technical use of language as a device to create possibilities for her characters. Though not as fluent in Bajan Creole as those who influenced her, Marshall thoroughly researched idiom and speech in Barbados in writing her first novel. Marshall credits Frank Collymore, the Bajan scholar, editor, and literary critic, for his influence in shaping her use of language in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, saying that “[his] pioneer work corroborated, corrected, and enriched my own findings” (Marshall, “Language Is the Only Homeland” 14). In particular, Collymore published a dictionary of Bajan sayings

that Marshall drew upon for reference.³ The extensive research Marshall conducted points to the importance she placed on capturing the intricacies of speech in the text. The blending of Bajan Creole with Deighton's flashback to his youth embodies what Marshall understood so well: "language is the only homeland."⁴ For Deighton, language is homeland; it is the closest that he is able to get to returning to what he considers home.

Marshall's celebration of Barbados through language comes directly from her manipulation of the intricacies of vernacular language that she studied. Marshall makes use of word choices and inflections particular to Bajan Creole such as "wunna" (you all) and "din" (did not); she switches subject-object possessive pronouns ("weself" for "ourselves"); she preserves diction ("ain" for "ain't," "yuh" for "your," "Sat'day" for "Saturday"); she also uses double adjectives and adverbs ("*full-full* man," "sun shining bright-bright"). The ease by which Deighton commands Bajan Creole is in direct contrast to Selina, a nod to Marshall's awareness of the difference in language communities between father and daughter. Ultimately, the linkage between language and space is done to add *sound* to the vision Deighton describes, foregrounding the importance of language throughout the novel. Subtly yet masterfully, Marshall's usage of language as a descriptor creates a world that must be understood through the ear as much as it is understood by the eye.

We see Marshall's care in showing textured differentiation between language communities in her contrasting depiction of AAVE. One such example can be seen in Miss Thompson's speech, which differs from Standard English as well as from that of the other Bajan women in the novel. Miss Thompson, a migrant from the American South, displays patterns consistent with AAVE. For example, in one exchange, Ms. Thompson remarks about Selina's coming of age, "You was right, honey, you ain't no more child" (Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* 215), making use of traditional AAVE features such as the double-negative and lack of verbal conjugation for third person singular subjects.⁵ And while these features are also present in Bajan Creole, Marshall further differentiates through intonation. Compare, for example, Thompson's "what *scairt* [scared] my baby?" (216, emphasis added) with Silla's "If I *din dead* yet, you and your foolishness can't kill *muh* now! (266, emphasis added), and Marshall's purposeful contrast is apparent. The constant use of "honey" as well as the phrase "ain't no more child," reminiscent

³ Collymore founded the literary magazine *BIM* in 1942. See Edward Baugh's *Frank Collymore: A Biography* (2009); Philip Nanton's "Frank A. Collymore: A Man of the Threshold," (2004); and Raphael Dalleo's "Shadows, Funerals, and the Terrified Consciousness in Frank Collymore's Short Fiction" (2004).

⁴ In 1996, Marshall delivered the Winston Scott Memorial Lecture at Frank Collymore Hall in Barbados. Her title: "Language Is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad."

⁵ See Erik Thomas and Walt Wolfram's *The Development of African American English* (2002) for a concise discussion of core AAVE elements.

in grammatical structure to the popular black church song “Don’t Feel No Ways Tired,” also signals a cultural connection more characteristic of the American South. Marshall is acutely aware of differences within the diaspora that underscores a linguistic connection between both communities yet she is careful not to elide them. These voices, all within Selina’s community, reflect Marshall’s own experience of these different yet intertwined traditions.

In addition to using language as a device to depict acculturation, Marshall also uses language as a tribute. Marshall’s desire to place so much emphasis on the particulars of language was both a challenge to herself and a tribute to her ancestors. She states plainly, “I wanted to see if I had the same power with language that I sensed the mothers possessed” (Pettis and Marshall 120). Yet Marshall’s tribute also engages in a political act: centering a marginalized group and making them visible. This was of no small consequence to her; it was, in fact, one of her primary motivations for writing:

[I say to myself,] “Yes, what I do is meaningful; it is real work.” Because I’ve managed to put on the literary map the dual community, West Indian and African-American, that nurtured me. And to celebrate women, especially a group of West Indian women, my mother included, who were my mentors and teachers early on. To put them on the page. That work was important work for me. These women, the “mother poets” as I call them, never had the opportunity to be recognized, published poets. They were invisible, both as poets and women. (qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 286)

It comes as no surprise then that she unwaveringly credits “the mother poets,” those women who used speech to make sense of the world around them, as the inspiration for “the beautiful/ugly” in her novel. The world of the mother poets was “was a worldview of inclusion, of seeing people, matter, nature, objects, things, whatever, as complex, often contradictory whole creations – and I underline the word whole” (Marshall, “Language” 18). Language and communication serve as a temporary refuge, though not a panacea, to the ills that plague Selina’s mother Silla, as well as Deighton. While Deighton’s reminiscing and speech places him in his physical land of origin despite the reality of his existence in Brooklyn, USA, Silla’s perpetual blues are temporarily halted by her weekly chats and cooking sessions with other Bajan women in the kitchen.

The “beautiful/ugly” so eloquently articulated by the mother poets rests in the language(s) and realities depicted by Marshall in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The narrator’s own usage of “the mother” throughout (as opposed to the possessive, i.e. “Selina’s mother”) captures the realities of the tense and complex relationship between Silla and Selina. Silla, emotionally distant, spends much of the novel

clashing with her equally stubborn daughter, a troubled relationship that Silla ironically can only make sense of using her own mother's poetic wisdom: "And my own mother did say two head-bulls can't reign in a flock" (Marshall, *Brown Girls* 216). And, as Trudier Harris observes, Selina's growth in the novel is best observed through conversations she has with "other Bajan women with whom she spends most of her social diversions, and with whom she reveals her deepest feelings" (64). Speech, particularly and the full embrace of complexity found in the "beautiful/ugly," serves as the mesh of a communal quilt for people within the African diaspora, encapsulating the emotional, political, and spiritual extremes present in their lives. The unique cadence and idiom preserved in the language mirrors Marshall's mother poets' use of language as "[a] way of reaffirming themselves and their humanity" (18). For Marshall, the voice of her characters, the act of speaking, and manner by which they speak are all inextricably linked to storytelling, to and to black life itself.

Marshall was unwaveringly dedicated to "[giving] some young man or woman a sense of their right to be in the world" (Marshall qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 291). For Marshall, the affirmation of self through language in the broader context of a world that so often demanded silence was expressly political. Doing so "is a political act...it's all the things that I set out to do..." (291). Thus, writing her experience within the literature serves as the ultimate homage to her literary forebears, indirectly honoring those whom she fell in love with in the Macon Street Branch Library while more directly honoring the mother poets who inspired her: "[L]anguage was also a kind of weapon for them...They would say to each other 'Soully-gal, you gotta take you mouth and make a gun in this white man world.' They were always using language as a weapon, as a strategy for survival" (Marshall, "Language" 18). Unapologetic in her own use of voice, Marshall expresses no regrets for using such weaponry. In response to critiques of "the highly political nature" of Marshall's writing, she offers the following snide rebuke: "I plead guilty, your honour. It was a carefully plotted, premeditated act" (Marshall, "Language" 24). There is no mistaking of Marshall's intentionality in her writing in this regard; she herself notes that "combining of the personal with the political and historical [is] the most significant feature of my work" (24). Her second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, would further the politicized implications of voice through the character of the incomparable Merle Kinbona.

OF MERLE AND MOUT' KINGS

Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* harnesses the potential of language as a vehicle to define oneself, to preserve history, and to negotiate the shifting terrain of "home" for Bajan immigrant families. Yet our understanding of Marshall's usage

is incomplete without a consideration of the esteemed role of orators in black folklore. This reverence can be observed in various parts of the African diaspora through worship of Legba, through reverence of the griot storyteller or preacher, or in the adulation of the blueswoman/bluesman. In recent decades, its evolution has manifested itself in spoken word poetry (“slams”) and hip-hop (“freestylin” and “battlin”),⁶ where the wielding of hyperbole and metaphor, often for the purpose of “signifyin,” or “toasting” are the standards by which one earns the respect of an opponent, an audience, and a community. As previously noted, the power of the speaker’s content is a function of *how* the speaker communicates. Marshall was not unfamiliar with the weightiness of style in speech. Again, she returns to the episodes in her mother’s kitchen to explain the significance of being a supreme wordsmith:

The mothers were skillful raconteurs as well. A few among them...were acknowledged to be superlative talkers and master storytellers. Those few were crowned “mout’ kings,” kings of “talking the talk,” as it were.
“‘Sully-gal, you’s a real-real mout’king!’ was said of them.
There was no greater compliment. (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 88, emphasis added)

In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, we see Marshall’s own mastery of this banter, most frequently in scenes that include everyday members of the community, whom Marshall refers to collectively as “Little Fella.” One vibrant exchange occurs between Stinger and Ferguson, two seemingly ancillary characters having what seems to be another chapter in an endless series of arguments. The pair argue at length concerning the nature of a fictitious slave revolt led by Cuffee Ned. Not unlike the mout’ kings of Marshall’s youth, the two engage in a no-holds barred bout of verbal jousting:

“Fergy, I don’t give a fuckarse what you say...It wasn’t no six months. How could he have held out against a regiment that long?”
[...]
“What the blood hell shite you know about it anyway? [...] You ever read the book? You ever read *any* book? You, Stinger, a man that didn’t get past primer standard, who don’t know nothing besides cutting canes and keeping your wife belly full up!” (Marshall 134)

⁶ See Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip-Hop Culture* (2006), especially pp. 63-70.

What might be identified in an elite "white space" as a lack of decorum or *ad hominem* attack is fair game in within black communal space of the rumshop in Bournehills, just as it is in the storefront of Hurston's "Spunk," or in street scenes depicted by The Last Poets and Common in "The Corner." Style becomes just as important in winning the argument as the logic itself. The speakers command control of the audience (and thereby wield power) with their elocutive ability. And while Stinger's vernacular fluency makes him a force to be reckoned with in his own right, Marshall gives a nod to the women of her youth in endowing Merle with supreme oratorical abilities in the novel.

Whereas *Brown Girl, Brownstones* focuses on the development of Selina within a space far from her parents' homeland, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* takes on the complex legacy of colonialism in Bournehills. Merle, the cornerstone of Marshall's second novel, offers the reader a glimpse at a stream of consciousness that never shies away from the "beautiful/ugly" in her remarks. At the core of Merle's understanding of self is talk, a reflection of Marshall's own worldview:

Talk has always been essential to the way I see the world, and I saw Merle as being very much like the mother poets in that one of the mothers was really a superlative talker.... I saw Merle as a kind of "mouth king"...The talk was sort of expressive or indicative of the state of her consciousness of mind. Also, *I could use the talk as a means of saying what is not to be said, so that she says things that one is not supposed to say*. She says things about the political situation; she says things about the relationships of people of the island, those with power, those without. (Pettis and Marshall 124, emphasis added)

Marshall's usage of Merle offers a vision for the transformative potential of the "mouth king." Merle defies the boundaries and confines of silence imposed by racialized and patriarchal constructs, even as she is burdened by undeniable psychological trauma. Her sense of purpose comes from the very act of speaking out. It is her answer to Deighton's loaded inquiry, "how you mean?" from *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She creates meaning through the very act of refusing silence.

Marshall attributes Merle's refusal to be silenced to "her disjointed and fractured life," a collection of experiences that intentionally indicate to the reader "that she was a woman in serious psychological trouble" (Pettis and Marshall 124). The violence exerted upon Merle is both immediate and historical, an amalgamation of the legacy of slavery and colonialism present in her family history, Bournehills' history, and in the very reason Bournehills is the subject of an "uplift" project by well-to-do American whites. As Coser observes, "[Merle's] struggle for

personal coherence and cultural definition parallels the reaffirmation of a rebellious history in which slaves played the central role in Barbados” (37). Merle’s insistence upon talk, as Coser suggests, offers more than a personal biography: it offers a partial cultural biography of people of African descent in Barbados.

Within this context, then, Merle is not unique, but typical, meant to be relatable to the experiences and thoughts of those within the African diaspora with comparable experiences. The crucial difference, however, is that she speaks where and says what others would (or could) not. She is not aloof; rather, she is aware and intentional in her use of speech, even if it violates the imposed expectations of the audience. By her own admission, she declares, “I’m a talker. Some people act, some think, some feel, but I talk, and *if I was to ever stop that’d be the end of me*. And worse, I say whatever comes to my mind and the devil with it” (Marshall, *The Chosen Place* 63, emphasis added). Merle’s consciousness of her lack of self-censorship suggests a disregard for however she might be interpreted (“the devil with it”), thereby freeing her from expectations of those who might take issue with her views. In creating Merle, Marshall expands upon her project with language, showing the effect of voice on others as opposed to limiting it to a space for development of the self. She uses speech as a revolving mirror.

Of significant importance within the context of this argument, Merle’s speech is only rendered as “odd” when seen through what Frantz Fanon refers to as “the white gaze” of approval (95). This is most prominently displayed through the character of Harriet Shippen. Marshall uses Harriet Shippen, “a mainline Philadelphia WASP” (Denniston 103), as a stand-in for traditional Western and Eurocentric values to augment the power and potential of Merle’s voice. (Harriet’s roots as a Pennsylvanian, in addition to the presence of an ostensibly benevolent American aid foundation, also indicts the US as participating in a colonialist exploitation of Bournehills.) To Harriet, Merle is “exhausting,” (112) and “odd”; she is a burden, an outsider, unintelligible and, above all, not worth listening to. Harriet’s observation about Merle’s accent is that much more telling and ironic: she is, after all, a white U.S. citizen who is consciously aware of her own outsider status on the island in her conversations with her husband, Dr. Saul Amron. Yet even as she laments how out of place she feels, Merle is the one who is “odd” to her. Worth noting here is that Harriet’s feelings do not extend solely to Merle, but to the entirety of those in Bournehills. In a *written* communication to her Uncle Chessie, who is in the United States, she tells him, “*They’re really strange people*” (Marshall 234), thereby deepening the chasm that marks the binaries Marshall establishes (written/oral, Western/non-Western, white/black). Marshall craftily makes Harriet the amanuensis of Western white hegemonic normative behavior, a character with “a need to dominate” and an “unquestioned sense of superiority” (Denniston 116). Specifically, through language, we see Harriet’s entitlement to be the boundless center. Wherever she moves, language must move with her on her terms. Despite

this, Merle—who freely moves between social spaces—subverts this power construct in her disregard for it.

Merle's introduction to Harriet underscores the potentialities of when and how to speak in order to subvert the expectations of the white gaze. In the initial party where the two meet, she enters "briskly" and announces herself, "Speaking in the exaggerated island accent she had purposely affected" (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 70-71). She commands the space immediately and without reservation through her use of the word. Merle speaks to Harriet only after greeting her cousin Enid and the other women working in the guest house. More importantly, Merle asserts herself and initiates the introduction on her own terms rather than displaying any hint of submissiveness or passivity. Harriet, who is sitting down, is the passive one, "[taking] the hand thrust at her" (Marshall 72). Harriet's attempt to reset the tone of their acquaintanceship with her own sense of decorum ("And you must be Mrs. Kinbona") is swiftly rebuffed by Merle, who deftly uses charm to assert her own politics by correcting her: "...don't worry with that *Mrs.* Kinbona business...The name's just Merle. And soon it won't even be that. No names. *No tags or titles.*" (Marshall 72, emphasis added). Merle, who claims the space as her own and engages Harriet on her own terms, is not being informal for the sake of being endearing or sycophantic. Rather, as suggested by her ownership of space and self, she eschews racialized expectations by subverting norms through "her purposely affected" vernacular.

Merle's voice directly leads to action, signaling a more concentrated focus on the transformative potentialities of the mout' king. This is seen when Merle "make[s] a gun" (Marshall "Language" 18) out of her mouth as she was fired from her post as a high school instructor. The defiant Merle, refusing to teach the whitewashed version of Cuffee Ned's revolt, "performed something terrible down there" upon being dismissed and "told them all where to get off, even cursed the headmaster-self" (Marshall 33). Merle, who "says what she feels to," embodies the power and bravery of the mout' king's unapologetic connection with her African past and her heritage, a power harnessed by her orality (Marshall 33). Here, Marshall sets up a powerful contrast: whereas the oral tradition is a site of freedom, the written word has transgressed upon the children and parents of Bournehills by perpetuating a lie. Leesy retells the story: "the headmaster wanted her to teach the history that was *down in the books*, that told all about the English. But she refused, saying that way made it look like black people never fought back" (32, emphasis added). The Western written word in this instance rejects the agency of people of African descent. Merle's voice, however, unapologetic and unbound in the face of colonialism's legacy, disrupts the false narrative. Yet still, critics might observe that this incident evinces another level of the "beautiful/ugly": despite Merle's heroic performance, the school remains and it is Merle who is displaced by the power structure. Despite this, it is also worth noting that Marshall herself is using

the written word to celebrate voice, another layer of subversion in within these complexities of power.

Another caveat that one might point out is that Merle speaks in “standard” English, or at the very least, her speech differs when compared to Stinger and other Bournehills characters, thus refuting the argument of vernacular speech as a vehicle for transformative action and possibilities. On one hand, Marshall may be alluding to Merle’s exposure to a wide variety of social settings or even indicating privilege, such as her University education in England. However, Marshall’s presentation of Merle’s speech is not what it might initially seem to the reader. Harriet captures this when she speaks with Saul about Merle as they get situated in Bournehills for the research portion of their development project. She laments to her husband that Merle “is exhausting...She just goes on and on, and with that *accent and the odd way she puts things I can’t understand what she’s saying, which is probably all to the good*” (Marshall 112, emphasis added). Marshall makes it clear that, despite the presentation to the reader, Merle is indeed speaking in the rhythms and intonations unique to Bournehills. This is compounded by her use of idiom, such as when Saul asks her if she is familiar with West African Juju and she replies, “How you mean?” (Marshall 317) borrowing from Deighton’s words at the beginning of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Thus, while Marshall is not as intentional in capturing Merle’s engagement with more technical elements of vernacular speech, she does clearly associate her with a language community distinct from Saul and Harriet by virtue of her use of idiom, accent, and disregard for their norms.

Marshall’s use of the mout’ king in *the Timeless Place, the Chosen People* further celebrates language as a transformative instrument, this time directly in the face of norms within “white spaces.” Through channeling the mothers in the kitchen, she celebrates language as a weapon. Taken collectively with *Brown Girl, Brownstones, the Timeless Place, the Chosen People* speaks directly to cultural and political imperatives present in the decades following their publication. Specifically, Marshall’s message about the transformative potential of language in personal and political spaces is one that is in conversation with the challenges of the twenty-first century. The reception of Rachel Jeantel’s testimony and its consequences offer a harrowing reminder of what make Marshall’s fashioning of language so critical.

TIMELESS: THE LEGACY OF PAULE MARSHALL & BLACK VOICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Part of Marshall’s enduring relevance in the twenty-first can be located in her representation of the layered tapestry and power of language, be it in standard English, Bajan Creole, or African American English. This phenomenon that itself has found fertile ground in various social media platforms. More than a medium of

expression, social media is a repository that reflects, if not magnifies, the racialized politics verbal and visual expression. This inextricable bond, part of a larger "digital-race assemblage" (Sharma), has led to an efflorescence of vernacular expression in the form of posts, memes, and hashtags (or "Blacktags"), particularly on Twitter. The content of these are often uncensored, eschewing formality in ways reminiscent of Merle, Silla, or the mothers in the kitchen. That these Tweets and hashtags often become trending topics on Twitter speaks not only to a lasting interest in vernacular language, but also to a significant black presence on the platform.

According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014, a disproportionate number of black Americans use Twitter compared to their white counterparts--28% compared to 21%, respectively (Krogstad, "Social Media Preferences"). This disproportionate representation has been consistent over time; in 2009, blacks were still more likely than any other group to use Twitter.⁷ And though the study was limited to the U.S., there is reason to believe that it is indeed a diasporic phenomenon,⁸ with the emergence of "Black Twitter"—an entity unto itself – within and beyond the United States. The reason for Twitter's curious and unique appeal, I argue, is the same reason for Marshall's enduring relevance: that is, they serve as sites of unapologetic blackness that both reaffirm black expressive practice and challenge dominant spaces.

Similar to Marshall's own usage, Black Twitter users deploy language and engage in performance that "allows for the galvanization of the black community against oppression, making performance a key arena for the individual and collective negotiations and positionings that constitute 'Blackness'" (Florini 207). This signifyin' offers a linguistically-driven (and, with the inclusion of memes, visually-driven) space for unmitigated critique of power structures, intra-communal comfort, celebration of ritual, and disregard of the white gaze.

Twitter's unique emphasis on brevity – one-hundred and forty characters – lends itself to concise and cheeky turns of phrase, witty remarks, and banter, precisely the foundational elements of the well-documented "dozens" or "toasting" endemic to black vernacular expression. Hashtags similarly place value on brevity

⁷ In 2009, 26% of blacks used Twitter compared to 19% of whites (Krogstad). The data is based on self-identification and does not differentiate between West Indians, Africans, or African Americans, hence the usage of the term "black American" here.

⁸ See, for example, Serino's "#RainbowNation: The Rise of South Africa's 'Black Twitter'" (2003).

and literally use language as an organizing tool for cultural space. Just as the mother poets conceptualized of language as a weapon and waxed poetic on a seemingly endless array of topics, today's raconteurs showcase their wit and idiom in a global conversation. They digitize the kitchen of Marshall's youth. The physical walls of the kitchen are modernized and renovated. Language becomes the boundary, inviting poets for play, for critique, or both.

A sampling of two popular hashtags from 2015, #CNNBeLike and #GrowingUpBlack, offers a useful nexus point that highlights the relevance of Marshall's celebration of speech, language, and idiom. #CNNBeLike originated in the wake of news media outlet CNN's coverage of the hanging of Otis Byrd, an African American male found hanging from a tree in Mississippi in 2015. Though not accused of any crime, the network found it necessary to note that Byrd had a criminal record in its initial presentation of him as a victim, sparking an immediate response from black users on Twitter. A cursory search of the hashtag from the time of the incident reveals acerbic critiques of this criminalizing and demonizing blackness, combining an embrace of an ugly depiction with clever and tragically comical revisions of historical events. The very encoding of #CNNBeLike in a vernacular that registers in different parts of the African diaspora is significant. As Rickford notes, "the tendency [of AAVE] to encode its most important tense-aspect distinctions through a series of preverbal markers (*be, bin, done, BIN, fitna, had,* and so on) rather than through verbal affixes strikingly parallels the pattern in various West Indian Creoles" (154). This also parallels linguistic practice in West African languages (155), a veritable vernacular triangular road, all united under the umbrella of resistance to the white gaze. Vernacular-based hashtags offer a digitally spatialized site and medium for communication and protest.

Similarly, #GrowingUpBlack relies on the vernacular as a rallying point for play and critique, just as Marshall's first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, relies on a constant dialogue of critique and embrace of Western norms. Marshall's novel depicts a literal story of "growing up black" for a first-generation West Indian immigrant in an African American community, whereas #GrowingUpBlack provides what might be best thought of as a perpetual communal narrative. The latter serves as a real-time collective autobiography, a crowd-sourced memoir. It echoes Marshall's thoughts of the "deepest common level of our experience" (Marshall qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 291) or the "collective me" (291) which uses language as homeland. Not unlike Deighton, users posting under the hashtag reminisce upon their childhood, its cultural markers, and celebrate the conundrums of the "beautiful/ugly." The unique timbre, cadence, and idiom preserved in the language mirrors Marshall's reflection on the mother poets' use of language as "[a] way of reaffirming themselves and their humanity" (Marshall, "Language" 13). In Black Twitter, we see a digital re-imagining of Marshall's "Little Fella," affirming

themselves shamelessly through unabashed and unfettered celebration of language, devoid of the fear of policing.

CONCLUSION

In Carole Boyce-Davies' *Moving Beyond Boundaries* (1995), Surinamese writer Astrid Roemer reflects upon the intricacy, primacy, and power of language when she writes, "[a]s Black, as Women, and as so-called Third World citizens, we possess a rich tradition of listening and speaking, of experiencing and narrating, of complaining and celebrating. Why should we silence our imaginations which lighten our spirit in language-sounds?" (243). Paule Marshall has taken this question to heart, creating literature that excavates as much as it deposits. She writes the mother poets and mout' kings who raised her into the historical narrative, thereby unsilencing them. Simultaneously, she digs up and wrestles with challenges posed by a legacy of movement and racialized power struggle within the African diaspora, which, as her novels suggest, must be confronted head-on. Her embrace of the "beautiful/ugly" offers a framework for understanding the grittiness and grace of the language she employs, a language which reflects the world it describes.

Marshall deserves to be recognized within the long list of black writers who have insisted upon preserving the oral tradition in their writing. Her insistence on language as a device for self-definition and affirmation places her alongside more contemporary incubators of vernacular expression and orality, from the generations of writers and poets who have come of age during her career to an entirely new and unprecedented generation of communal poets on social media, an embodiment of Marshall's "collective me" (qtd. in Graulich and Sisco 291). The latter is particularly exciting, as it offers a platform for those whom Marshall once identified as invisible to speak without restraint. Her work speaks to the present in ways that can be seen in creative expression of black writers and in the political sphere. Though the reception of Rachel Jeantel serves as a reminder of the ways in which black voices remain marginalized, Paule Marshall is a reminder of the redemptive value of language as a means of survival. That her first two novels, written more than fifty years ago, are directly in conversation with the politics and emerging technology of our times is a testament to her prescience and enduring legacy.

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