

# Ethnicity and the other in marshall and phillips



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If a novel is indeed grounded in a vision of the world, how do authors who find themselves essentially “groundless”, caught in a web of shifting homes, cultural allegiances, and ethnic identities find their unique vision? Paule Marshall and Caryl Phillips, both authors of Caribbean descent (St. Kitts and Barbados, respectively) raised in distant countries (Marshall in Leeds, and Phillips in Brooklyn) attempt to articulate the shifting identity that stems from such diaspora. Marshall explores ethnic identity in Barbados through the struggles of its people, the survivors of imperialism. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Marshall uses the conflict in Bournehills to represent conflict on a historic and global scale. Phillips examines his own ethnic identity in *The Nature of Blood* through stories about European citizens, the imperialists themselves. He writes on a grand scale; his works cover six centuries. Phillips thus employs a technique entirely opposite to Marshall's, who personalizes the historic and contains his story within a single continent. Both authors utilize silence and space to examine the characters' sense of self and otherness. History manifests itself in both novels as an important force of both isolation and unification. At the center of each text lies the questions of how ethnicity is defined within one's own culture, how it shifts when one becomes the “other” in the dominant culture, and how the notion of cosmopolitanism may help or hinder such questions of identity. These issues dominate the texts so fully that their presence changes the aesthetic structure of the narratives themselves. Essential to an understanding of the issues of shifting identity and culture is an understanding of the idea of cosmopolitanism. For Homi Bhabha, this must be discussed from a majoritarian/minoritarian perspective. Mainstream culture is a construction; once it is defined, anyone who doesn't “fit” becomes the “other”.

Imperialism and racial constructs rely on this division, justifying the oppression or obliteration of the “other”. Bhabha sees cosmopolitanism as a method through which to break away from this mindset by not trying to “fit” in with the identity that stems from one’s sex, race, language, religion, or country of birth. Anthony Apier believes that it “allows people to name themselves,” even if that name is not tied to a particular ethnic or cultural identity. Marshall’s childhood in a Caribbean home in New York – a benefit of what Werner Sollers calls America’s “polyethnic” quality – facilitates this sense of fluid identity. It is somewhat easier for her to achieve than it is for Phillips, whose education and environment were quintessentially “British”. This helps the reader to understand why Phillips tends to write in “Western” English about “Western” subjects, yet is just as eager as Marshall to understand his place in the culture, both as a member and as an outsider. Even though Marshall writes of “the motherland” and the scars that its people bear as a consequence of literal imperialism (and now cultural), her portrait of Merle conveys the same sense of “placelessness”. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, ethnicity is firmly tied to community; it is the easiest way to separate the categories of “us” and “them”. The central conflict is between the people of Bournehills and the American research team (whose well-meaning, but paternalistic attitude is embodied in the lost and conflicted Harriett). Within each camp, however, there are still outsiders. Saul’s identity as a Jewish man sets him apart from the Americans, and Merle’s time in Europe and her eccentricities make her feel out of place in the community, as well. The bond that they form in the novel is firmly tied to each character’s recognition of the other as a fellow “hybrid”. The importance of community is underlined by the ambiguity of the novel’s

protagonist. It is conceivable that the protagonist could be either Merle or the people of Bournehills as an entity. The community's function as both a haven against imperialism and an oppressive environment is illustrated in the Carnival celebration. Unstoppable revelers charge past the markers of economic imperialism, overpowering the cries of Harriett, who believes that the crowd will stop simply because she tells them to. It is a small - yet terrifying - triumph. At the same time, while Carnival is touted as a celebration of culture and history in Bournehills, it is itself imported, and feels uncomfortably like a tourist attraction. In the same way, the community of Bournehills teeters precariously on the line between cultural preservation and oppression. As the environment penetrates each character, it almost become a character itself. Saul's importance as an outsider to (and oppressor of) the people of Bournehills is closely tied to Othello's experience of the Jewish ghetto in *The Nature of Blood*. As a man of power, Othello, too, stands apart and slightly above the inhabitants of the ghetto, yet at the same time, as a Moor, is completely isolated in Venice. The cultural division between individuals is more pronounced in *The Nature of Blood* than in *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*. Every character is "the other" and yet has another character "other" to them - and the penalty for such "otherness" is the worst one imaginable. Eva wonders how she will ever be able to fit into the human race again, much less return to a home that she no longer has. This sense of utter homelessness, of "placelessness," is essential to *The Nature of Blood's* harrowing content and style. Faced with the challenge of writing a moral novel about the Holocaust, Phillips' writing must toy with the very nature of the conventional novel. The nonlinear, overlapping passages confront the reader with the intertwined nature of

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these forms of oppression, separated by time and targets, but all originating in the same fear and hatred of “otherness”. This is what makes Othello’s experience of the ghetto and Saul’s experience of Bournehills so compelling: it would take an outsider to see the objective truth of the experience of the oppressed, but for Saul to understand the emotional horror behind it, he must have known oppression himself. One of the techniques that both Marshall and Phillips utilize is silence, which serves a metaphor for both resistance and oppression. Silence can be used as a refusal to acknowledge an oppressor, or a hesitance to speak out against injustice. DeLamotte describes Marshall’s use of silence as “doubleness” (DeLamotte, 3). It manifests itself in different ways, such as the silence of Bournehills and the silence of desolate places that have outlived their usefulness. Merle’s incessant talking is a defense against a history of silence that she, as a black woman, is expected to continue regardless of what she has experienced in her own life. Phillips uses silence in a slightly different – but no less important – way. For him, silence is less an expression of submission, and more a manifestation of a tortured inability to speak. Giacobbe, Moses and Servadio are unjustly tried. It is a form of legal silence, for nothing they say can prove their innocence. Othello cannot speak the language in Venice. While he can make noise, he cannot be understood. Silence and emptiness seems to inhabit Eva’s entire person. Even the pauses in the text, which serve as physical expressions of silence, are important markers. Marshall and Phillips also strive to make their texts both personal and global. While Marshall sets her story in contemporary Barbados, she attempts to stretch beyond the island to address the larger problem of imperialism throughout the world. The power struggle Merle endures with the redheaded

Englishwoman is not merely a mark in Merle's life, but is rather a symbol for the Red Queen - a metaphor of England's aggressive imperialistic grip on the world. Barbados' own history makes it an ideal locale for an examination of the Black African diaspora, a fact that she calls attention to when describing the physically and ethnically specific features of some of the inhabitants. Phillips, however, spreads out his story over centuries, and incorporates a great many characters with whom he has no cultural connection. He paints on the great canvas of history with a very broad brush, and yet somehow manages to compose a book about what it feels like not to have a homeland. It is not necessarily the job of a novelist to answer the great questions of life. A novelist should, however, present these questions, examine them, and then allow readers to come to their own conclusions once they are done sorting through the text. And yet we must ask what conclusions Paule Marshall and Caryl Phillips have come to about the questions surrounding ethnic identity. One might venture that the conclusions the two authors hope to reach are akin to Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and cosmopolitanism - that ethnic identity is something one is "assigned", and that it can often do more harm than good. Both novels wrestle with this question, but neither author seems to reach a satisfying conclusion. It seems quite possible, given the current state of the post-colonial world, that a satisfactory conclusion is not yet within reach.

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