

# The Material Imperialism of the Home in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*<sup>1</sup>

**Brian Bartell**

## Summary

"The Material Imperialism of the Home" in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* argues that in the fictional Caribbean country Bourne Island, where this novel about post-World War II development is set, home is understood as a conflicted site of technological and material structures left over from slavery and colonialism. It further focuses on the novel's narration of how global transformations in the economy and the development of new technological ideologies that were connected to histories of slavery and processes of racialisation emerged not just in imperial centres, but also in the quotidian places of the Caribbean home. The first part of the article considers the different ways that the "Timeless People" and protagonist Merle Kinbona experience home as an entanglement with the colonial and slave past, and how this condition affects their potential futures. The second half of the article looks at the novel's treatment of cybernetic and information technologies through the character of white anthropologist Allen Fuso and how his efforts to resist becoming a United States-based domestic, heteronormative, "IBM Machine" are related to histories of racial oppression, technology, imperialism, and new forms of value extraction.

## Opsomming

"The Material Imperialism of the Home" in Paule Marshall se *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* voer aan dat in die fiktiewe Karibiese land Bourne Island, waar hierdie roman oor ontwikkeling ná die Tweede Wêreldoorlog afspeel, die tuiste verstaan word as 'n plek wat deur konflik gekenmerk word; met tegnologiese en materiële strukture wat oorgebly het van slawerny en kolonialisme. Dit fokus verder op die roman se vertelling van hoe globale transformasies in die ekonomie en die ontwikkeling van nuwe tegnologiese ideologieë wat met geskiedenis van slawerny en prosesse van etnisering verband gehou het, nie net in imperiale sentrums plaasgevind het nie, maar ook in die daaglikse plekke van die Karibiese tuiste. Die eerste deel van die artikel bestudeer die verskillende maniere waarop die "Tydlose Mense" en protagonis Merle Kinbona "huis" ervaar as ineengestremel met die

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koloniale en slawernyverlede, en hoe hierdie toestand hul potensiële toekoms te beïnvloed. Die tweede helfte van die artikel fokus op die roman se hantering van kubernetiese en inligtingstechnologieë deur die karakter van die wit antropoloog Allen Fuso, en hoe sy pogings om daarteen weerstand te bied om 'n Verenigde State-gebaseerde huislike, heteronormatiewe "IBM-masjien" te word, verband hou met geskiedenis van rasse-onderdrukking, tegnologie, imperialisme, en nuwe vorme van waarde-ontginning.

## Introduction

Paule Marshall's 1969 realist novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is set in the fictional Caribbean country of Bourne Island, described as the Caribbean island closest to the "colossus of Africa" (1969: 13). The novel focuses on the continued legacy of slavery and colonialism in the immediate post-colonial era, in the context of a proposed United States-led developmental project that comes to the island with the intention of remaking the impoverished region known as Bournehills. The Center for Applied Social Research (CASR) is led by the anthropologists Allen Fuso and Saul Amron, and his wife Harriet. While development is supposed to mark a break with the colonial past, CASR is itself entangled with that past, and it is Harriet's family wealth, initially derived from the slave trade, that funds the (ill-defined) project.

Like most of the limited scholarship on the novel, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (1988: 58) has argued in her article "Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*: Untenable Sisterhoods," that the novel centres on two primary themes: "that of the importance of history in developing the national and personal identity required to transcend the legacy of colonialism and slavery, and that of the need to foster Caribbean economic self-sufficiency as the only way to achieve and preserve true independence ...". The novel's ethical and political concerns with an as yet unrealised self-sufficiency, whether that of the nation-state, the people, or individuals, is narratively developed, especially, in relation to the home. In the novel, home is understood in capacious ways, from the houses that are frequently former plantation structures, to the entirety of the impoverished sugar cane plantation region of Bournehills. As the protagonist Merle Kinbona states towards the novel's end, as she is about to leave Bournehills for East Africa to find her daughter and to explore the political potentials of the Diaspora, "But I'll be coming back to Bournehills. This is home ... sooner or later (one) has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, he calls home, do what he can to change things there" (468). As this article will argue, in Bournehills "home" is a conflicted site. It is a place where the technological and material structures of colonialism remain and continue to affect the island's life. At the same time, it is one where the emergent possibilities and desires of the then-immediate post-colonial present were met by new technologies, forms of capitalist value extraction, and imperialism. Even

now, fifty years on, the novel continues to be relevant because of the ways that it explores how these new technologies, both infrastructural and informational, were, and are, connected to histories of slavery, processes of racialisation, and transformations in the global economy that developed not just in imperial centres like Silicon Valley, but also in the quotidian places of the Caribbean home.

The novel's portrayal of these conflicting social and material histories, especially as they are linked to the emergence of United States' imperialism, is the subject of Kamau Brathwaite's 1970 review. For Braithwaite, the novel's central concern is with narrativising the complex ways that the Caribbean as "home" was enmeshed in a world of "imperial materialism". For Braithwaite (1970: 126), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* was an exceptional novel that changed his "way of looking at West Indian writing." According to him, prior to Marshall "... West Indian novels have been so richly home-centered, that they have provided their own universe ..." and have not positioned themselves either in relation to "communal history" or the "larger context of Third World underdevelopment" (125). He goes on to write:

The question however remains as to whether the West Indies, or anywhere else for that matter, can be fully and properly seen unless within a wider framework of external impingements and internal change. The contemporary West Indies, after all, are not simply ex-colonial territories; they are underdeveloped islands moving into the orbit of North American cultural and material imperialism, retaining within themselves stubborn vestiges of their Euro-colonial past (mainly among the elite), and active memories of Africa and slavery (mainly among the folk).

(125)

My article draws from Braithwaite's argument that Marshall's conceptualisation of home should be taken up in relation to the world of "material imperialism" and for its account of the modalities of social differentiation and hierarchy that it narrates between the island elite, Merle Kinbona, the "Timeless People", and the American developmental anthropologists.

One of the novel's most significant, and paradoxical, forms of home and one that is especially tied to "material imperialism" is Merle Kinbona's guesthouse, "Cassia House", where the American CASR team stay during their time on the island. Kinbona is the novel's primary anti-imperial and historical voice; she is London-educated and at the novel's start has recently been fired from her position as a high school teacher for teaching the history of "Cuffee Ned's" nineteenth-century slave rebellion. At the same time, she also runs Cassia House, a former plantation founded by one of her distant relatives and passed down to her by her colonial administrator father. However, this possession is weighted with historical and racial entanglements, because Merle, who is black, is the daughter of one of her father's

servants and he long ignored their relationship. Cassia House is introduced as, “Rambling, run-down, bleak, the house was one with its surroundings, as much a part of the stark landscape of sea and sky as the sea and the dunes and the boulders strewn in the surf ...” (107). Like much of Bournehills, such as the Cane Vale sugar processing factory that dominates the region’s economic and social life, or the many other machines that this essay will discuss, including Merle’s “badly-used” Bentley, Cassia House can be read as a “ruin” as it has been defined by Ann Stoler in her essay “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination.” Stoler (2008: 194) defines ruins as not simply decaying post-imperial structures, but instead “imperial formations” that are active processes linked to “what people are ‘left with’: to what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things”. Stoler’s concept of ruination provides insight into the ways that the ordering of past, present, and future are bound to the material in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, and how “rambling, run-down, bleak” structures like Cassia House are not confined to the past but continue to be active in the present, influencing both processes of racialisation and character’s sensibilities.

Cassia House is also Merle’s personal residence and after Merle suffers a mental breakdown towards the novel’s end, Saul Amron describes her room as a “museum” of artefacts from slavery that “expressed her” (401). Cassia House and Merle’s relationship to it is akin to what Jane Bennett has called in “The Force of Things: Steps Towards and Ecology of Matter” an “ecology”, Bennett writes,

Ecology can be defined as the study or story (logos) of the place where we live (oikos), or better, the place that we live. For a thing-power materialist, that place is a dynamic flow of matter-energy .... For a thing-power materialist, humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections or an *ecology*.

(2004: 365)

As I will discuss in the first part of this article even though Merle is relatively well-off compared to the rest of the impoverished “Timeless People” of the novel’s title, she is still subject to this materialism of home, whether that be Cassia House or the other structures leftover from colonialism and slavery. It is with the knowledge of this material power that, at the novel’s end, Merle decides to break with these entanglements (even if she plans to someday return home) in order to enter a potential future in Africa that seems less tethered to this material past. *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is, in part, a narrative of Merle’s personal development and break with home, but is also a narrative of the ways that the rest of the impoverished “Timeless People” cannot do so, and at the novel’s end remain tied to the island’s material histories.

The first section of this article will consider the different ways that the Timeless People and Merle Kinbona experience Bournehills as home through their material and technological entanglements with the slave past, whether these be Cassia House, the Cane Vale sugar factory, or Bournehills itself. Cassia House is also the site of a particularly provocative discussion of race, gender, and technology between Merle Kinbona and Allen Fuso that will be the focus of the second section of this article. Towards the novel's end, and after reckoning with his sexuality, Allen reflects on his role as a data specialist for the development project and the contradictory ways that his work in Bournehills allows him to resist becoming a United States-based domestic, heteronormative, "IBM Machine". More than this, this scene suggests the ways that the novel grapples with how the Caribbean, as recent scholarship by Louis Chude-Sokei has also argued, was a focal point for reflecting on the historical relationships between race, gender, the body, and technology. The novel narrates, and suggests the potential of the novel as a form to narrate, these entangled histories, and how so-called "American" technologies like cybernetics were connected to histories of imperialism and racialised value extraction, but also to intimate histories of the home in the Caribbean, as well as the United States.

### **Home and the Legacies of Plantation Modernity**

*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People's* epigraph is attributed to the "Tiv of West Africa: Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end". This quotation foregrounds the extent to which slavery infuses every aspect of the novel, as well as its vast temporal and cultural scope. Saidiya Hartman (2002: 759) has argued in her essay "The Time of Slavery" that there is an African Diasporic "time of slavery" that "trouble(s) redemptive narratives" about the ends of slavery, and "negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead". *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is a novel of this non-linear, African Diasporic time, and the reader encounters the continuing presence of the past in the opening pages, and especially through the eyes of Vere Walkes.

Vere is a young man, who as the novel opens, is returning to Bourne Island after working in the United States as part of an agricultural labour exchange program. The plane that he arrives on also carries the members of the CASR development team, but it is Vere, looking down from the plane, who provides a sense of the way that Bournehills is separated from the rest of the island and is at the same time connected to the past (and the global economy) through the technologies of the plantation and the sugar cane economy. First the reader is given the ridge, "Clever's High Wall", that separates Bournehills from the

rest of the island, and is described as resembling “a ruined amphitheatre whose other half had crumbled away and fallen into the sea” (14). Although the hills and the lush green colour of the region are noted, it is, however, the presence of the Cane Vale sugar factory that dominates the physical landscape and Vere’s sense of place, just as it dominates the social and economic landscape. For Vere the sight of the factory from above instantly reminds him of the “deep pit” and the “rollers used to extract the juice from the canes” that also crushed and killed his uncle (14). But the factory has other personal connections, and above all Cane Vale perversely represents home and impresses on him how “fixed and inevitable had been his return, how inescapable” (14). At the heart of the novel is a tension around the meaning of modernisation in the immediate postcolonial period and the relationship of the slave and colonial past to the politics and technologies of then-emergent futures. Cane Vale and Bournehills’ sugar cane fields represent a British colonial-era political and economic regime, which, while posited throughout the novel as outdated, continues to make a claim on the lives of the “Timeless People” like Vere.

In Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus’s, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint Domingue and British Jamaica*, it is argued that the plantation, which would include factories like Cane Vale, is best understood as a “machine,” a term employed frequently throughout the slave period, because of the plantation’s “modern” attempts to synchronise people and technological machines, as well as local and global economies. They quote the 1765 *Essay upon Plantership* by Antigua’s Samuel Martin as an example of the “metaphor” of the plantation machine:

A plantation ought to be considered as a well-constructed machine, compounded of various wheels, turning different ways, and yet all contributing to the great end proposed; but if any one part runs too fast or too slow in proportion to the rest, the main purpose is defeated.

(2016: 5)

In a recent article, “Ghosts in the Posthuman Machine: Prostheses and Performance in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*,” Justin Haynes (2017: 1) argues that Cane Vale and its “rote and repetitive actions” are “symbolic of European Enlightenment in the Caribbean”. In Haynes’s essay, Vere is particularly important because his eventual death in an automobile he had rebuilt (and that ultimately turns on him and seems to purposefully fall apart) evidences the novel’s concern with the “movement from the European Enlightenment to posthumanism”, and a world of autonomous machines (1). However, in the passages connected to Cane Vale (or Cassia House) the modernity of the plantation is not superseded, but remains present and orders the social world, the home, of Bournehills. If, as Burnard and Garrigus describe it, the plantation was a machine of synchronisation with the main purpose of aligning enslaved people and commodities with the export

economy, Marshall's novel brings out as well the ways the plantation, and Cane Vale specifically, is a machine that still synchronises time, racial hierarchies, and modes of violence, in the immediate post-colonial Caribbean.

The interior workings of the Cane Vale sugar factory are seen for the first time through applied anthropologist and CASR project director Saul Amron on one of his data collecting perambulations through Bournehills:

(the factory was) a low sprawling building in serious disrepair, with a torn, rusted galvanized roof and a smokestack rising above it like a great phallus – he was reminded of the deep hold of a ship. There was the noise, for one – the loud unrelieved drumming and pounding of the machines that powered the rollers which crushed the juice from the canes, and the shrill, almost human wail of the rollers themselves as they turned in their deep pit .... And the light in the place was dim and murky as in the hold of a ship ... because of the dimness and the cane chaff which came flying up from the roller pit to whirl like a sandstorm through the air, the men working there appeared almost disembodied forms: ghosts they might have been from some long sea voyage taken centuries ago.

(154)

Cane Vale is presented here as the “hold” of a slave ship where contemporary labourers are also simultaneously the “disembodied” “ghosts” from “centuries ago”, bound still to the modernity of the plantation economy. In their ghostliness, they are not only representatives of past regimes of value extraction, but they also represent the ways that slavery and the plantation modernity of what Cedric Robinson called, in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, “racial capitalism” relies on socially differentiated, racialised life to produce surplus value, while abstracting life as value. Slavery, as Stephanie Smallwood and others have argued, was a regime in which African diasporic peoples were racialised, categorised, abstracted, and turned into fungible bodies. In *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Smallwood (2007: 35-36) writes, “... the economic enterprise of human trafficking marked a watershed in what would become an enduring project in the modern Western world: probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within”. This passage mirrors Marshall's description of Cane Vale. The factory extends the disciplining regime of slavery into the 1960s-present; the ghostly figures are never quite extinguished and they continue to produce surplus value for Kingsley and Sons, the English company that owns Cane Vale. The role of Cane Vale in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* suggests a complimentary alternative to C.L.R. James's (1989: 85-86) description of how the plantation ordered past, present, and future in *The Black Jacobins*. James, writing in the context of the 1930s Trotskyist and labour movement, argued that the revolutionaries of Haiti were “workers”, not simply slaves, and an “organized mass movement”, because the “sugar-

factories” had already made them “closer to a modern proletariat than any of group of workers in existence at the time ...” The “Timeless People” of Bournehills play a different role than the revolutionary proletariat. While they labour in a ghostly space between the past, present, and future, they are also critical witnesses to a different trajectory of technological modernity than that of James’s vision of the development of the working class out of the plantation’s forms of social organisation. Instead, as they epigraph suggests, they are attendant to a (perhaps impossible) future reconciliation with the slave past that is not reducible to new technologies or the reorganisation of labour.

As labourers in the sugar cane economy that appear indifferent to technological development, Bournehills and the “Timeless People” are chastised by the island’s elite for being “behind god’s back” (197). Technologies, whether they be jukeboxes, televisions, or prior infrastructure development projects, breakdown or are rejected by the “Timeless People,” and for this reason they are considered belated or outside of technological modernity by the island’s elite, who desire a tourist economy and new forms of (subsidised) industrialisation. However, the “Timeless People” have a critical relationship to the post-World War II modernity of forced obsolescence and dependent economic relations precisely because of the ways that for them the continued existence of plantation modernity reveals the ways in which the technologies of modernity are also technologies of racialised hierarchy and forced labour.

In the narrative, Cane Vale functions as a point of articulation between a capacious sense of home that Vere, for example, is always drawn back to, and more specific sites of home like Cassia House. Like Cassia House, Cane Vale is an imperial ruin. At the novel’s end, as anticipated, Cane Vale finally breaks down, throwing off balance the social world of Bournehills (even though it is also assumed that the factory will ultimately be repaired and dependent economic relations will continue). As word of the broken rollers reaches Bournehills through a “plangent cry that rode the air like hundreds of conch shells” from the factory’s horn, that also signals the extended time of the Middle Passage, all of Bournehills gathers (383). In the novel, the U.S. development project, a “project” as Kamau Braithwaite notes in name only (127), is supposed to replace the colonial-dependent model, and the breakdown of Cane Vale signals this transition. However, it also signals two other things, the ways that U.S. models of technological development cannot undo past wrongs, and also the ways that the materiality of the history of slavery infuses the lived experience of people like Merle.

When Merle enters Cane Vale she is as critical of the CASR team as she is of the factory. When they express their inability to repair the factory’s broken rollers that press the sugar cane, Merle says:

After all, you’re from a place where the machine’s next to God, where it even thinks for you, so I’m sure you know how to repair something as simple as a roller. Machines come natural to your kind. Well, then, show your stuff and fix this one ... fix it. That’s the least you can do. Or is that asking too much?



Perhaps all you can do is walk about asking people their business. Collecting data. And writing reports .... Look at those poor people standing out there like they've turned to stone, afraid to set foot inside the gate when they should be overrunning this place and burning it the hell down .... Talk about change?  
(389)

In *Cane Vale*, the time of slavery is shown to be both imbricated with and at the same time beyond the technological capabilities of post-World War II American developmentalism. This broader historical critique is infused with Merle's own helplessness in the face of history: that despite her attempts, alongside the "Timeless People", to remain faithful to Cuffee Ned's slave revolt, as she says "My name never fixed a thing" (389). *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* does not necessarily agree, however, with Merle's assessment of the "Timeless People" who witness the breakdown at the factory's edge, for they are concerned with a longer trajectory of freedom than Merle's immediate concerns. In this way the novel stages the shared but heterogeneous experiences of the continued presence of slavery in the Afro-Caribbean world.

While a member of the "Timeless People", Merle's belated recognition by her white colonial father means that her economic and social status diverges from theirs, and Merle is thrown more explicitly into the present and thus into the uneven technologies, times, and contradictory futures of a post-colonial world where colonialism is still the historical condition of possibility for the future. For example, Merle drives a "badly used" Bentley, formerly owned by the island's British colonial administrator, and in the opening pages she is explicitly related to the "ruined but still regal old car" and described as "no longer young ... (and) declin(ing) towards middle age" (193). This is not simply a comparison. Throughout the novel, Merle is shown to be entangled with, and affected by, things leftover from slavery and colonialism that populate her life.

This is the case as well with her "rambling, run down, bleak" guesthouse, and former plantation, on the shores of the Atlantic, described by Marshall as the site of "Diaspora" and "enforced exile" (107). The interior of her bedroom, normally hidden from the CASR team and other guests, is an intensified version of Cassia House in general. Perhaps most ominously Merle sleeps in the "antique" bed of the plantation's founder, Duncan Vaugan. Like Jane Bennett's "thing-power" (2004: 365) where things have an energetic force and are "actants" (2004: 355) in the human and extra-human world, Jasbir Puar has argued in articles like "I Would Rather Be A Cyborg Than A Goddess: Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory" for a theory of *agencement* (drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) that "de-privilege(s) the human body as a discrete organic thing" (2012: 57). She argues that "Categories – race, gender, sexuality – (should be) considered events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects." Bennett and Puar's formulations help to open up

the ways that “Merle” is a character in time, formed through encounters with materials like automobiles, junk objects, Cassia House, Cane Vale, and the wider processes of Brathwaite’s “material imperialism”.

It is because of her awareness of the powerful influence of the materials of colonialism and slavery that Merle ultimately breaks from them in order to temporarily leave home in search of her estranged daughter and husband in East Africa. As she says to Saul after her recovery at the novel’s end: “My traveling papers ... I had to sell almost everything I owned to raise the money, but I managed. You should see my room. It’s as bare as a bone. Everything gone – all that old furniture and junk .... And the wreck of a car is gone .... Gone!” (462-463). In these lines, Merle acknowledges and rejects what she calls the “junk” of colonialism and slavery. This is not a rejection of history but an attempt to reckon with the ways its materiality infuses every aspect of her life, and by implication the life of Bournehills, even if unlike the rest of the “Timeless People” she is able to break with these things because the objects she owns have a commodity value in the post-colonial marketplace.

This break is also a break with the masculinist trajectories of development. It is not members of the island’s male political elite, like Merle’s former lover, Lyle Hutson, a prominent lawyer and politician, who break with the regimes of economic dependence. *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*’s material politics of home are thus connected to the novel’s formal politics. Belinda Edmonson (1999: 5) has argued in *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women’s Writing in Caribbean Narrative*, that for male authors the making of novels in the pre- and post-independence Anglophone Caribbean was closely connected to the “making” of themselves as men through “the cultural authority that (had) been passed on to them from British intellectual discourse of the nineteenth century”. Thus, for Caribbean, often diasporic, women writers like Marshall, it was necessary to “re-vision what constitutes literary authority” as well as models of masculinity and nationalism in the writing of novels (6). Thus, in Merle’s break with the imperial materialism of home the novel makes a claim for rethinking the centrality usually ascribed to masculine actors in postcolonial political movements in favour of a broader and more nuanced consideration of the role of women and gender in national and diasporic politics.

### **American Imperialism and the “IBM Machine” of Home**

Merle’s break with the material imperialism of her home highlights the novel’s complex narration of modernity and processes of modernisation. If, on the one hand, and following Edmonson, Merle’s move away from Bournehills is a critique of the masculinity of the Caribbean novel and the nation-state, the “Timeless People” continue to labour in what Lloyd Best and

Kari Polanyi Levitt (2009) of The New World Group have called a “plantation economy further modified,” in which the Caribbean economy continued to be dominated by foreign ownership and export production.

At the same time, through the developmental anthropologist Allen Fuso’s fraught relationship with sexuality, race, and new technologies, the novel explores how the long history of slavery in the Caribbean was (and is) entangled with then-emergent ideas about cybernation and information. In the ways that a new, American, modernity emerges hesitantly out of the old, British colonial one, Marshall’s novel illustrates Fredric Jameson’s claim in *A Singular Modernity* that “modernity” is a narrative category; one that is always an ideologically charged rewriting and periodisation of what is understood to constitute “modernity” (2002: 40). As exemplified by Merle’s rebuke at Cane Vale of U.S. developmentalism for an obsession with information and for its lack of technological prowess, the novel is a critique of the post-World War II “modernization” form of the narrative of modernity.

As Michael Adas (2006: 243) has argued, “modernization theory” in the period was a way of “resuscitating the technological triumphalism” of World War II and a way to “elevate generalized claims regarding America’s superior technical prowess and material culture” against the Soviet Union in the “contested zone” of the “Third World”. As Adas and others have argued, the Caribbean has always been central to the United States’ imperial project, whether under the auspices of the Monroe Doctrine, the Panama Canal, or its early-20th century occupation of Haiti (the list could go on). In the context of modernisation theory in the post-WWII period the specificity of the Caribbean, however, is virtually irrelevant as modernisation theorists understood development to be “universal rather than society-specific” (245). In the novel, CASR is led by the sympathetic figure of anthropologist Saul Amron, who becomes Merle’s lover. Saul sometimes sees Bournehills as part of an undifferentiated Global South (100), but he is primarily someone who genuinely wants the people of Bournehills to be involved in the project, even if he is consistently perplexed by what he sees as the “mystery” of the region. He ultimately comes to openly question the role of development and modernisation (226) and argues that CASR should only institute a small scale, locally controlled project (416-417). Thus, if Bournehills is the chosen place for development by both U.S. philanthropists and the island’s political elite, it is also the chosen place for resistance to this project (even if the future remains uncertain), and there Saul becomes a critic of modernisation’s universal claims.

Even more than any active rethinking, however, the CASR project never really “takes off” as an active material project, to borrow a term from U.S. modernisation theorist W.W. Rostow.<sup>2</sup> Instead of either a small or large scale

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2. On “Take-Off” see W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*: “We come now to the great watershed in the life of

infrastructure project, CASR is primarily, as Merle argued above, focused on “collecting data,” “writing reports” and “walk(ing) about asking people their business” in order to “prepare the way” (157) for a project still to come, and whose future is made uncertain when Harriet has it put on hold after finding out about Saul and Merle’s relationship.

In this respect, CASR is less a modernisation project and is closer to a biopolitical one as it is defined by Michel Foucault in, for example, his Collège de France lectures like *Society Must Be Defended* from 1975-1976, as well as in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*.<sup>3</sup> Here birth and death rates and economic statistics become objects of knowledge and are aspects of projects that produce a “population” available to government. In the novel, CASR primarily focuses on producing a “demographic analysis of the population of Spiretown [the largest town in Bournehills] by age, sex, occupation and the like” (374). The novel’s (outline of a) biopolitical and data collection project is also closely connected to the way, as Jonathan Beller has argued in *The Message is Murder*, that the Middle Passage and the slave auction block “reveal the imposition of digital metrics (like ‘price’) on bodies ... with flagrant disregard for their person”, and laid the foundation for what Beller (2018: 20, 5-6) calls today’s world of “computational capital” and “Digital Culture 2”.<sup>4</sup> This is not only a world of widespread technological value extraction, but one in which the racialising hierarchies of modernity suffuse the social world. In the CASR data collection project, the novel suggests the ways the technologies of slavery are carried over into the post-WWII material imperialist world of biopolitical governance and information-based, and computational, value extraction. Concurrently, through the figure of Saul of Saul Amron’s of of Saul Amron’s assistant Allen Fuso, who conducts the data project, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* also explores the ways in which data collection and emergent forms of value extraction were connected to the quotidian realm of the home, as

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modern societies: the third stage in this sequence, the take-off. The take-off is the interval when the old blocks and resistances to steady growth are finally overcome. The forces making for economic progress, which yielded limited bursts and enclaves of modern activity, expand and come to dominate the society. Growth becomes its normal condition. Compound interest becomes built, as it were, into its habits and institutional structure.” (7)

3. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault succinctly defines biopolitics briefly: “The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed ... a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through” (139).
4. “Digital Culture 2” is a continuation of “Digital Culture 1”, the “universalizing aspirations” of assigning quantitative values during the period of mercantilism, slavery, and settler colonialism (5-6).

well as new distributions of racialised and sexualised subjects. Most provocatively, the novel itself, and the characters in it, struggle to understand how they are made by, and are themselves making, this new world.

In a passage just before Merle's breakdown, and that parallels her own complicated relationship to home, she discusses frustration, family, and futurity with Allen Fuso. In response to an inquiry about his statistical work, Allen says,

I can do this with my eyes closed. I'm a walking IBM machine, don't you know that? Always was, even as a kid. Mine's just one of those freak talents. But this isn't what I'm talking about. What I'm trying to say is that I've never done anything that was a real challenge, that didn't come easy like the stuff here.

(378)

As in earlier passages related to Merle and her automobile, Allen is gendered and sexualised in relation to an "IBM machine".<sup>5</sup> His presence on the island is not simply about development, but also about his own problematic desire to escape from this form of mechanisation and the ways that whiteness and heteronormativity are programmed.

At the beginning of the novel, Allen's white, middle class, WASP subjectivity is described as the product of the technologies of post-World War II American domesticity: "All the various strains that had gone into making him ... might have been thrown into one of those high-speed American blenders, a giant Mixmaster perhaps, which reduces everything to the same bland amalgam beneath its whirring blades" (17). One result of this is his suppressed sexuality and his unrequited love for Vere, which heavily codes his response to Merle's suggestion in this passage that he might settle down and marry (something Merle knows is not possible). He says,

"A nice girl and some children, eh?" It was said with a contemptuous snort. "And why didn't you add while you we're at it a nice job teaching at some nice Midwestern university like Michigan State or Wisconsin – that goes along with it, after all. Or better yet, a nice job making a lot more money in private industry doing research in cybernetics and the like. They're eager for guys like me, the computer minds .... A nice girl!" He turned away.

(380)

On the one hand, according to the novel, Allen is out of place in the world because his whiteness and sexuality exclude modes of life (in very distinct ways) in both Bournehills and Madison, Wisconsin. This is a speculative moment in the text, but it demonstrates that concerns about how new technologies like cybernetics, IBM computers, and information technology,

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5. One of the secondary aspects of the narrative is Merle's own complicated sexuality, which I will not explore here.

that were calling into question what it meant to be human, were not simply “American” issues. Instead the passage suggests that post-WWII white American conceptions of a stable domestic masculinity were also tied to processes of racialisation, imperialism, and technological mastery. Through his encounter with Caribbean and African Diasporic peoples, Allen comes to the realisation that he has been made from birth into a white calculating machine in the whirl of a post-WWII suburban “blender”. But this isn’t a simple encounter. For not only does it lead Allen to question his sexuality, but the novel also shows how Allen’s involvement in the CASR’s data collection project makes him part of a larger social machine, and distribution of economic power, where the residents of Bournehills are transformed into data for potential value extraction for U.S. developmentalism, and thus forced to continue to live as dependent, black labour, in a plantation economy. Allen’s resistance to becoming an “IBM machine” is thus connected to black, colonial, dependence, although this does not free him existentially but only bodily from certain forms of manual labour.

Louis Chude-Sokei (2016: 83-85) has argued in *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* that in, for example, Norbert Wiener’s the *Human Use of Human Beings*, cybernetic theorists have consistently connected new automation and cybernation technologies to slavery, even if those discussions have not always fully interrogated their racial implications. At the same time, Chude-Sokei maintains that the Caribbean, in the work, for example, of Aimée Césaire or Sylvia Wynter, has always been the site of extensive examinations of how the plantation tried to turn people into machines, as well as the complex and contradictory futures that emerged out of plantation modernity. Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* should be classed in this tradition because of its consideration of the histories and futures of race and technology in the immediate postcolonial period, and especially the ways these developments were part of the home and everyday life.

Merle and Allen’s brief discussion does not fully work out the relationship of information, “IBM machines”, and cybernetics to processes of racialisation in the global economy. In the novel, most significantly, the “Timeless People” remain black and not fully human in their supposed “incapacity” for technological development, while Allen’s whiteness is constituted in part through the possibility of becoming a middle class machine, even if here the “IBM machine” has a problematic relationship to heteronormative futurity. This scene also points to the complex ways in which during the immediate post-WWII period the emergence of cybernetics was connected to new theorisations of the relationship between materiality and “information”, as well as to computers, artificial intelligence, human embodiment, and what might constitute life after the end of (white) labour.

N. Katherine Hayles (1999: 3) argues in *How We Became Posthuman* that in the post-World War II period, and in the shift from the human to the

posthuman, the body came to be thought of as the “the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate”, and that “the posthuman view configures (the) human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines”. Central to this shift in views is the ways in which information, through the work of, for example, Claude Shannon, came to be seen as a pattern that could be disarticulated from its “material substrates”. Hayles argues that this move consolidated the liberal conception that the subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body” (4-5). Alexander Weheliye (2002: 23) has critiqued Hayles for a view of the posthuman that “reinscribes white masculinity as the (human) point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state” and that Hayles’ posthuman is “little more than the white liberal subject in techno-informational disguise”. Weheliye argues that this reinscription happens because of an occlusion of the imbricated histories of slavery, the body, and racialisation. At the same time Weheliye contends, most importantly, that because of this history, “Afro-diasporic thinking has not evinced the same sort of distrust and/or outright rejection of ‘man’ in its universalist, post-Enlightenment guise as Western antihumanist or post-humanist philosophies. Instead, black humanist dis-courses emphasize the historicity and mutability of the ‘human’ itself ...” (26).

This intellectual history, which dates to the beginnings of African slavery, and in the United States the introduction of the cotton gin, is too long and complex to discuss in detail here. However, in addition to the example of Sylvia Wynter and her interrogation of the restricted post-Enlightenment, bio-economic, conception of the human she calls “Man2”,<sup>6</sup> one could include prominent and diverse examples such as Ralph Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man*, the 1960s-era work of James and Grace Lee Boggs on the contradictory potentials of industrial automation,<sup>7</sup> or John Akomfrah’s Afrofuturist film *The Last Angel of History*, all of which historicise the relationship between processes of racialisation and technological development at pivotal moments in the (re)conceptualisation of the human. Weheliye’s essay, like Chude-Sokei’s work and these other examples, is an important critique of not only the ways that processes of racialisation are often absent from scholarship on technology, but how black thought has consistently interrogated what constitutes the category of the human.

Marshall’s own intervention narrates the overlapping histories of plantation modernity and then-emergent cybernetic, and racialised, distributions of life and especially the ways that questions of the human were socially distributed in the Caribbean and in the material imperialism of the home. While Weheliye

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6. See especially Katherine McKittrick, (ed.) 2015. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

7. James Boggs. 2011. *The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Workers Notebook* in *Pages From a Black Radical’s Notebook*. Stephen M. Ward (ed.). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

critiques N. Katherine Hayles' omission of race in her discussion of posthumanism, Marshall shares with Hayles not only an interest in the ways that cybernation was evaluated, as it was in the Turing test, in relation to definitions of gender and sexuality, but also a belief in the importance of literary narratives to understanding technological histories. As Hayles argues,

literary texts often reveal, as scientific work cannot, the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations .... It is a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words.

(24)

Today the Hotel Atlantis in Barbados, on which Cassia House is based, is no longer rambling and bleak, but instead a luxury resort. This transition marks the continued reliance of the Caribbean on tourism and dependent economic relations that *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* discusses at length, and further confirms the novel's prescient concern with a material imperialism of home. Yet, the histories of race, technology, the home, and colonialism are, as is nearly always the case, erased in this world of tourism, luxury, and commodification. In the face of tourist economies, and the uneven social and economic hierarchies of global capitalism, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* recounts these histories and remains an important narrative, deserving of more scholarly analysis, of the continued presence of the slave and colonial past in the material structures of the postcolonial world, and the ways that racialised and gendered technological regimes emerge out of the those pasts, and are lived and worked out in the spaces understood to be home.

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**Brian Bartell**

ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena, California  
Bpb2118@columbia.edu