Traumatic Displacements and Militant Mourning:

Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

and

Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"

Hawaii International Conference on the Arts and Humanities

Honolulu, Hawaii

12 January 2007

Bruce N. Simon
Fulbright Visiting Lecturer
Kyushu University, Seinan Gakuin University, and Fukuoka University
bsimon@rche.kyushu-u.ac.jp

Research and Development Center for Higher Education (RDCHE)
Kyushu University
Ropponmatsu 4-2-1
Fukuoka 810-8560, Japan

--Now in the whole area we are unclean, in mourning for the dead.

--Why in mourning for the dead?

--What is it that we have seen? Tell us, Mr. BDO! You are an educated man, you are the first government officer ever to come to a tribal area. We had thought that the independent government of India was a *fairy tale* for our lot. We have seen you, now tell us, what have we seen? ("PPTS" 116)

...they seemed to be puzzling over the sea in front of them which was so different from the mild Caribbean on their side of the island. Their wondering faces raised, they appeared to be asking the reason for its angry unceasing lament. What, whom did it mourn? Why did it continue the wake all this time, shamelessly filling the air with the indecent wailing of a hired mute? Who were its dead? Despairing of finding an answer they would turn away eventually... (*CPTP* 363)

I find myself unable to believe that I am the first person to publicly connect trauma, mourning, Marshall, and Devi. Given the ongoing dispersal of disciplines, canons, and methodologies in the humanities in general and postcolonial studies in particular, though, perhaps I shouldn't be that surprised. After all, when some are quite persuasively arguing that "postcolonial identities" ought to refer to processes of subjectification that extend beyond the formal or official end of any imperial or colonial relationship—Chinese, Roman, Aztec, Ottoman, Japanese, or Soviet as much as British, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, or U.S.—it becomes difficult to discover a corner of world literature or history that couldn't be relevant to at least one of the issues this definition raises. With that large a field to survey or ocean to cross, it's no wonder it seems not to have occurred to anyone else yet to share their comparative readings of Marshall's 1969 novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and Devi's 1995 story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha," identify through them a common

tale of colonialist/racialized loss, trauma/testimony, and mourning/melancholia, and analyze its meanings, significances, and stakes. In doing this today, I aim to intervene in debates *within* as well as *over* postcolonial studies, but above all I want to convince you of a certain exemplarity in Marshall and Devi's intertextual dialogue and of a certain urgency in their theorizing of traumatic displacements and militant mourning.

Now, it may seem that I am asking a long novel and a long story to carry an inordinate amount of weight in this talk. But a quick gesture toward a structuralist analysis of their plots and narrative strategies alone should dispel this view. Marshall's and Devi's works, although produced in different decades and regions, in response to two quite different forms of colonialism and two ambiguously (post)colonial temporalities, tell basically the same story ***[refer people to Similarities handout]***: a well-informed, well-intentioned, and sympathetically- if critically-portrayed male activist from the metropole travels to a remote, rural region of a fairly-recently-independent nation in order to understand and aid its people, slowly comes to realize the profundity of the limitations of his original project, and eventually witnesses the historical and contemporary traumas of the region's people, yet finds himself unable to offer any kind of testimony to the world outside the region

that would bear witness to what he has come to dimly understand as a massive mourning project for centuries-old failed rebellions against enslaving/colonizing forces. ***[refer people to Key Quotations handouts]*** In both works, a semi-omniscient, semi-objective third person narrator who's not quite a fully fleshed-out persona, but whose voice is nevertheless compelling, presents the traveller's consciousness in free indirect discourse, but scrupulously registers most natives' perspectives even more indirectly, through descriptions of postures, actions, and interactions. In both works, a range of postcolonial identities are identified, related to each other, and situated in political, social, economic, cultural, and historical contexts that are at once local, national, regional, and global.

To flesh out this bare-bones account of the Marshall-Devi tale, I should note a few more textured parallels between their works. In both, outsiders jokingly or exasperatedly or despairingly refer to Bournehills or Pirtha as needing a miracle, while natives refer to themselves and their region in the apocalyptic registers of their religions ("Bournehills comes like a nation God has forgot" [125]; "We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil" [120]). In both works, narrators focus on outsiders' responses to natives' body language, facial expressions, and gazes in order to convey something of the distance—temporal, spatial,

social, cultural, linguistic—between them. And they "follow the money"—not only to those locals, nationals, multinationals, and transnationals enriching themselves off the impoverishment of the natives, but also to those investing in the activism of their outsider protagonists (financing for Saul's development project is drawn from the Center for Applied Social Research, "the agency created by the Philadelphia Research Institute," a tax-exempt NGO funded largely by "the United Corporation of America or Unicor," itself "part of that great commercial complex which, like some elaborate rail or root system, endlessly crisscrosses the world, binding it up" [36-37]; Puran's salary is paid for by a "Punjabi industrialist" whose attitude is, "If reporting caste war keeps his paper going, so be it" and whose most profitable media holding is an "illustrated magazine called *Kamini*, devoted to women and the film world" [97]). Hence, Merle's "Who says the auction block isn't still with us?" (209) expresses metaphorically what Puran's "liberated bond laborers will become slaves again in order to survive, because of the administrative failure...to implement the emancipation" (190) expresses all too literally: both works portray a locale and a world in which the most influential public and private institutions are remote-controlled by and used on behalf of the wealthy, where colonial and pre-colonial patterns of land grabs, enslavement, indentured labor, sex work, and other forms of oppression and exploitation continue

after national independence has been attained (cf. *CPTP* 154, 204-211, 221; "PPSP" 109-110, 146, 161-166, 169-170, 186-192), and where social change, much less justice, seems impossible for those marked out by class, race/ethnicity, and location.

Even from this limited list of parallels between Marshall's and Devi's works, then, it should be clear that examining the formation of postcolonial identities entails neither an elision of class and the social nor an exorbitation of discourse and the cultural. In fact, their works offer a particularly inventive and productive way of mediating the contemporary and the historical, the singular and the exemplary, the affective and the effective. They may well enable us to rethink the history of early postcolonial studies as something other than a forced choice between a strategic essentialization of race and nation or a decontextualized celebration of diaspora and hybridity. Attending to the complexities of the intertextual dialogue between *CPTP* and "PPSP," above all, may help us to gain new insights into the making of postcolonial identities and what it takes to remake them. One of Marshall and Devi's most crucial insights, I aim to convince you, is their theorizing of traumatic displacement and militant mourning, which is closely tied to their relentless focus on the apparent impossibility of social change and global justice for the places and people they represent.

For it is not only in circumstances, structures, contexts, and histories that this impossibility is located in Marshall and Devi's works. It is as personal as it is political, as psychological as it is social, as subjective as it is objective. Their key characters' consciousnesses are constituted by loss and trauma. Flashback, repetition compulsion, and acting out are the dominant forces in the lives of most of Marshall's characters, from central ones like Saul and Merle to major ones like Harriet, Allen, Vere, and Lyle, and even to minor ones like Leesy and the unnamed Canterbury woman. Despair, depression, and death-wish characterize Devi's Nagesia tribals of Pirtha for much of the story; mourning their losses and preparing for their own passing seem to be all that remains for them to do. I don't have time to discuss here in depth how Marshall and Devi layer and interweave personal and collective, past and present traumas and losses, but suffice to say that the way in which they do so—their works' forms and narrative strategies—is itself part of their theorizing of traumatic displacement. They show both how being traumatized is itself a form of displacement and how displacement—whether through movement or separation due to kidnapping, removal, or migration or through loss of land and autonomy by conquest, theft, or deception—can be traumatizing. The tragic workings of their plots—the missed appointments, the lost opportunities, the mystifying encounters, the blocked

potentials, the failed communications—dramatize the ways in which traumatic displacements have costs and consequences that, like a pinball machine of pain and suffering, ricochet and accrue.

Yet the necessity of traversing these traumatic displacements is the point of Marshall and Devi's works. For those able to live through and live with them, witnessing and testimony are possible, even if neither is easy, simple, or, on their own, enough. Comparing and contrasting the shared yet separate witnessing of Marshall's Saul and Merle at the close of Carnival of each other's testimony and of Devi's Puran and Bikhia of the last days of the dying pterodactyl that they are sheltering in silence would be a talk in itself. But these are just two of many such moments in their works, which are made up of intricate patternings of testimony given and withheld, engaged and disavowed, healing and re-traumatizing. Following these patterns would leads us to the conclusion that a particular kind of militant mourning offers the best possibility for traversing traumatic displacements.

Or rather, at least two different kinds of articulations of mourning and militancy. As the passages from "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" that I quote from in my handouts show, Devi focuses on what the completion of the work of mourning means to the Nagesia tribals of Pirtha. Upon the death of the pterodactyl, Bikhia breaks his

self-imposed silence and creates a new myth, a new ritual, and through them a new meaning for its apparition and disappearance, all crafted to move his people from despair and depression at their conquest and deprivation toward hope and resolve to endure and outlast their invaders. In contrast, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* can be read as Marshall's attempt to demonstrate the value of a kind of postcolonial melancholia, or at least a work of mourning so protracted and massive that it takes on aspects of melancholia. Just as the Bournehills Atlantic mourns those lost in the middle passage, reshaping the landscape of Bourne Island into a commemoration of their loss, so, too, do the people of Bournehills mourn the defeat of the slave revolt lead by Cuffee Ned in ways both quotidian (tending Cuffee's grave) and periodic (Carnival masque).

Whether they privilege completed or interminable mourning, though, both Marshall and Devi seek to subvert and reimagine classic colonialist and racist stereotypes—of backward, primitive peoples trapped in the past by their irrational attachment to ancestral lands and traditions; of the superiority of civilization, progress, modernity, modernization, development—by showing that trauma has a history and a presence, that mourning has a politics and a promise. Despite their shared focus on the seeming impossibility of individual and collective change in the

face of traumatic repetitions and displacements, what Marshall and Devi's works offer is the possibility that a new sense of identity can be created out of a past and present that seem to augur unending loss. Even as their plots dramatize the force of a traumatic history of enslavement and conquest, their narrative strategies and formal techniques gesture toward acts of witnessing, testimony, mourning, and commemoration that provide resources for survival, endurance, and the beginnings of change. This tension is where they leave us, and where I'm going to leave you. I hope that what you heard and what you read in the past few minutes encourage you to explore Marshall's and Devi's language and literature on your own, and in concert with others. Thank you.

Structural Analysis of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

SIMILARITIES

CPTP	*both*	*PPSP*
1. Saul Amron: a radical anthropologist who seeks to design a development project in the Bournehills region of an Anglophone Caribbean island (modeled after 1960s Barbados) that aims to build from local knowledge and practices, empower the region's agricultural workers, and model ecological, economic, and political sustainability	1. A sympathetically-drawn male "outsider" protagonist--an experienced, influential, well-informed, and well-intentioned metropolitan activist still mourning a beloved first wife years after her death--comes to a traumatized rural region with plans to help its people...	1. Puran Sahay: a radical journalist who travels to Pirtha, a region in Madhya Pradesh—which names Devi in a note appended to the end of the story cautions have not "been used literally"; "Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society" (196)—to report on the failure of public and private aid efforts in the famine-stricken tribal region of 1990s India (which the government refuses to acknowledge is a famine zone)
2. Merle Kinbona; Stinger and Gwen; Lyle Hutson	2. interacts with a range of people of the region, particularly organic intellectual, reverse native informant, and comprador figures...	2. Shankar Nagesia; Bikhia; Sarpanch/Kausilja
3. Remote control from London and Washington; reliance on tourism; class, color, and gender divides on island; unwillingness of Bournehills people to accept half-measures or change imposed from without	3. slowly comes to realize the profundity of the limitations of his original project...	3. Profiteering by outsiders and their influence on local and regional politicians; depth of political corruption and apathy; failure of legal reforms and social programs; agenda of NGO tied to Hindu nationalist and other political parties; despair of tribals
4. Saul in Sugar's listening to Merle's testimony his first night in Bournehills; on road to Spiretown after witnessing Gwen, Stinger, and others cutting cane; in Sugar's again at the end of Carnival after Merle has interviewed him; in Merle's room after she collapses upon closing of Cane Vale factory	4. bears witness to the historical and contemporary trauma of the rural people of the region...	4. Puran with pterodactyl; Puran with Bikhia and Shankar after decision to end mourning period has been made

Structural Analysis of
The Chosen Place, The Timeless People and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

SIMILARITIES

CPTP	*both*	*PPSP*
5. Saul in Merle's room as he reflects on its symbolism and significance	5. achieves a barely articulate recognition of what he has come to dimly understand as their massive mourning project for centuries-old conquests, captures, and failed rebellions against enslaving/colonizing forces as well as for more recent losses that have been layered on top of and interwoven with the original defeats...	5. Puran's participation in mourning rites for the pterodactyl
6. Saul and Allen's report to their funders with recommendations for the second phase of the project--and their decisions over what to leave out: land-reform program; crop diversification; taxes and part ownership by the state of foreign corporations and banks	6. finds himself unable to offer any kind of testimony to the world outside the region about what he has witnessed or realized...	6. Puran's report to the sympathetic government officials who invited him to Pirtha--and his decisions about what to leave out, even in his unofficial report for BDO and SDO's eyes only: any critique of NGO; any mention of pterodactyl and what it means to the Pirtha tribals
7. Saul plans to return to the U.S., seek new funders for the Bournehills project, and set up a program to train anthropologists to work in their own regions	7. but leaves the region with a new sense of purpose, a more realistic sense of what being an ally to the people of the region entails, and a commitment to transforming the metropole.	7. Puran's plans: writing a report for one newspaper and trying to get other newspapers involved through human interest stories
8. Merle and Lyle: Lyle loans Merle money to travel to East Africa to meet her estranged ex-husband and daughter, after which she plans to teach or enter politics; Stinger, Ferguson, Delbert continue council that they founded with Saul and plan to work with Allen, who stays in Bournehills after Saul leaves	8. Meanwhile, the people of the region have also been changed by the encounter and begin to look for ways to change their situation.	8. End of mourning for tribals means new commitment to keeping their land; however, narrator informs us that the double dam project that would have ended famine and enriched tribal lands got shot down, the BDO and SDO were transferred to other regions for "inventing famine where there is no famine," and even the NGO gave up in the face of resistance from the tribals (165)

Key Quotations:
The Chosen Place, The Timeless People

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

traumatic displacements

"But we're an odd, half-mad people, I guess. We don't ever forget anything, and yesterday comes like today to us." (102)

But he had not gone far before he had to stop, as the vertigo which he had felt coming on took hold of him completely, causing the white marl road stretched level in front of him to rise up from its bed and undulate before his eyes and the sun to begin spinning like Ezekiel's great flaming wheel in his stricken gaze, blinding him utterly for a moment.

And he was struck then, in that moment, there on the road to Spiretown, by a double memory that had about it the quality of a vision. (163)

"She died like that, screaming the questions at me, cursing me for not being able to give her anything by way of an answer, telling me about myself. And telling me behind it all that it was my fault. Even after she had died," he whispered, his stricken voice ebbing away, "her eyes, I remember, kept on saying it had all been my fault...."

Bowed in the chair, his large bones awry and his own eyes, which sometimes gave the impression that he was quietly weeping inside, because of their reddish tinge, looking more so now, he was staring at Merle but seeing only his dead wife. And for the first time ever he was mourning her as he had never permitted himself to do before—openly, unashamedly, his guilt and anguish undisguised....

"I've had the strangest feeling in recent weeks that I haven't really begun again, and that I won't until I've made up in some way for what happened back there in Honduras. It's as though," he said, shaking his head in wonderment, "I'm only now beginning to feel it all." (325)

Slowly then, her head came up and staring through Saul into that other time, she uttered a low sharp cry, full of pain, which caught violently at her breath. It was as if an old wound deep at her center that had never completely healed, but had, at least, remained dormant over the years, quiescent, had suddenly begun to lance her again. "If only you had seen him when he came home that day," she whispered. "His face, the look on it...I will carry that look with me to the grave." (334)

He was and would continue to be the stranger in their midst, the outside, someone from Away. As he had always been, wherever he had worked. He had long ago accepted this as inevitable, yet for a moment walking along the road in the mild early-morning sunlight, he was shaken by a sense of his profound displacement. And he felt strangely thwarted as well. For it suddenly struck him that the search which had sent him wandering half his life up and down the hemisphere would not end in the hoped for discovery, and he would be forced to return for good, as unfulfilled as when he had set out, to the place where he always felt most alien; which had never failed to rouse in him when he thought about it the image of being in a house where the shades had already been drawn, the wreath and crape already hung at the door, and the next of kin were simply waiting for the final word to be brought down from the sickroom

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

upstairs. (259)

militant mourning

...they seemed to be puzzling over the sea in front of them which was so different from the mild Caribbean on their side of the island. Their wondering faces raised, they appeared to be asking the reason for its angry unceasing lament. What, whom did it mourn? Why did it continue the wake all this time, shamelessly filling the air with the indecent wailing of a hired mute? Who were its dead? Despairing of finding an answer they would turn away eventually... (363)

It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild-eyed, marauding sea the color of slate, deep, full of dangerous currents, lined with row upon row of barrier reefs, and with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament--all those, the nine million and more it is said, who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. This sea mourned them. Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased, it hurled itself upon each of the reefs in turn and then upon the shingle beach, sending up the spume in an angry froth which the wind took and drove in like smoke over the land. Great boulders that had roared down from Westminster centuries ago stood scattered in the surf; these, sculpted into fantastical shapes by the wind and water, might have been gravestones placed there to commemorate those millions of the drowned. (106)

He thought he suddenly saw the district for what it was at its deepest level, the vague thoughts and impressions of months coming slowly to focus. Like the room it, too, was a kind of museum, a place in which had been stored the relics and remains of the era recorded in the faded prints on the walls, where one not only felt that other time existing intact, still alive, a palpable presence beneath the everyday reality, but saw it as well at every turn, often without quite realizing it. Bournehills, its shabby woebegone hills and spent land, its odd people who at times seemed other than themselves, might have been selected as the repository of a history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south....

[D]eep down, at a depth to which only a few would be permitted to penetrate, it would remain fixed and rooted in that other time, serving in this way as a lasting testimony to all that had gone on then: those scenes hanging on the walls, and as a reminder--painful but necessary--that it was not yet over, only the forms had changed, and the real work was still to be done; and finally, as a memorial--crude in the extreme when you considered those ravaged hills and the blight visible everywhere, but no other existed, they had not been thought worthy of one--to the figures bound to the millwheel in the print and to each other in the packed, airless hold of the ship in the drawing.

Only an act on the scale of Cuffee's could redeem them. And only then would Bournehills itself, its mission fulfilled, perhaps forgo that wounding past and take on the present, the future. But it would hold out until then, resisting, defying all efforts, all the halfway measures, including his, to reclaim it; refusing to settle for anything less than what Cuffee had demanded in his time. (402)

Key Quotations:
"Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

traumatic displacements

--What did Surajpratap write?

--Nothing but a story.

--That was nothing but a story?

--How do I explain? Starvation for years. Fewer children are being born to them, and the administration still doesn't attach any importance to Pirtha. They have taken it for granted for some time that the government has given them up. Now how will they explain to themselves the reason for this misfortune? Whatever the case, they need an explanation if only for their peace of mind. So they are spreading stories. (101)

Now the SDO begins to speak in bursts. As if a badly wounded person is making a last-ditch effort to make a deposition to hospital or police, to the killers or to friends. Like that man from Chitowra.... The SDO is talking like that man. He is moving his hands, trying to explain, as if there's a tremendous communication gap between him and Puran, a tremendous (mental and linguistic) suspension of contact. Are the two placed on two islands and is one not understanding the most urgent message of the other, speaking with vivid gestures on a seashore? This asymptote is a contemporary contagion. (102)

--Some people invaded the Nagesia in some distant day and they still build huts facing due hillside.

--The same in Palamu.

In the houses of the Nagesias of Palamu Puran had seen no date-leaf mats, even in that notorious Palamu winter. What to do, my lord? The bosses dragged everything away. Even building their houses like hawks, out of sight of intruding enemies, the Palamu Nagesias have still not been able to avoid becoming bond-slaves, or kamiya, seokia, haroaha, charoaha, they have not been able to escape, anywhere. (133)

militant mourning

Now Puran realizes that he's never been in such a situation before. Where the ancestral soul casts its roving shadow, Bikhia draws, the settlement remains unclean and in mourning, and Shankar says, from a millennial other space, "We were!" Upon the backdrop of this experience there is the man-made famine. The same person, at the same time, banishes poverty in Constitution and Proclamation, creates poverty, protests in art-films. (140)

--Why did the foreigners come? We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas, they enslaved and bound us. They named us, as bond slaves, Haroahi, Mahidar, they named us Hali, named us Kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came were not human beings. Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestors' graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn't do it for us.

Key Quotations:
"Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha"

Bruce Simon brucesimon18@yahoo.com

--Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to our ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil. And so the unquiet soul casts its shadow and hovers. We didn't know how it would look. This is surely the ancestors' spirit! This is surely the curse of the ravaged land, village, field, home, forest! Now no one can save us. Now we are all unclean, in mourning.

--Here, I am here.

--I can't see you. But I say to you in great humility, you can't do anything for us. We became unclean as soon as you entered our lives. No more roads, no more relief--what will you give to a people in exchange for vanished land, home, field, burial-ground?

Shankar comes up very close and says, "Can you move, far away? Very far? Very, very far?" (119-120)

--Won't your mourning end?

--Bikhia knows.

Shankar says in an immaculate conviction, "Now Bikhia is above everyone. He will give everyone oil, then wea'll oil our body and bathe. We will shave our heads and faces, cut our nails, and come out of mourning. It was he who saw...he knows what there is to know, and we know when we saw him."

--What'll happen to him now?

--He is bound now, Babu, he'll keep the stone unsullied, perform the ritual, he will not be free in this life. And that stone! How can there be a move away from Pirtha, tell me that?

They would on no account have left the shelter of Pirtha hill and river, now the stone tablet has become another reason for their not leaving. Perhaps Pirtha was their last shelter, or their domain, their past. And now it is precisely there that one finds the tablet. A myth to bind the past to the present. Perhaps this explanation is necessary for their nearly extinct sense of ethnic being. How can one rob a people of the supernatural, of myth, what is in their understanding an unwritten history, when the present time has given them nothing? No one holds that right. (178)

Having drawn that stone tablet Bikhia is the guardian of the new *myth*. He will protect it.

And this mourning, this "oil bath" has given them an assurance. Now something has happened that is their very own, a thing beyond the reach of the understanding and grasp and invasion and plunder of the outsider....

Shankar says softly, "...But we will not leave Pirtha."

He looks around and says, "Why should we leave? Isn't this our place? Now no tribal will leave. The ancestors' soul let us know that all the places it visited are ours. Can anyone leave anymore, or will they leave?"

...Puran shakes and shakes his head. They will not leave, they will not go anywhere leaving those stones, hills, caves, and river. To the fertile fields, to the plains, where there is plenty of water, and many supports for survival.

--If they want to give us aid, let them give it to us here.

Spreading his arms, he says, "All this land was ours, the kings took it from us. They were supposed to return it to us, to whom did they give it back? No, we won't go anywhere. Let them give us our dues here." (193-194)