

Primitivist tensions in Caribbean-American literature: Claude McKay's and Paule Marshall's return to the island

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Abstract

Following Immanuel Wallerstein's and Giovanni Arrighi's world-systems perspective, this article undertakes a materialist analysis of the novels *Banana Bottom* (1933) by Claude McKay and *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) by Paule Marshall as examples of Caribbean American writing that reflect what Anibal Quijano and Wallerstein have termed "Americanity". Rather than perpetuate colonial discourse, the novels' engagements with primitivism in the description of their two female heroines replace the lush vegetation of the Caribbean often described in colonialists' texts with a landscape dominated by agriculture. In this way, labour is at the centre of these two novels that capture the twentieth-century world-systemic change of cycle through their characters' attempts to cling on to outdated agricultural structures. The novels thus portray the peripheral role of the Caribbean not only in the world-system but also in the American hemisphere, as derived from the authors' diasporic conditions. American influence on the Caribbean, which was a crucial aspect in the ascendancy of the United States in the world-system, also resulted in the migration of many Caribbeans towards this country. McKay's and Marshall's return to their islands not only brings the focus to their archipelago's peripherality; it also analyses the logics behind the diaspora.

Keywords

Americanity, Caribbean, ecofeminism, Paule Marshall, Claude McKay, world-systems analysis

Introduction

Commenting upon the work of Paule Marshall, the celebrated poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite problematized the fact that most literary works portraying the Caribbean are written from metropolitan contexts. For the authors of these works, Brathwaite contends,

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the “West Indies stopped in time at the snapshot moment of departure” (1970: 125). However, Brathwaite also suggests that these representations might be more accurate than others coming from the islands, since “[t]he 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” (1970: 125). Brathwaite’s phrase brings to mind both Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory of the capitalist world-system and Aníbal Quijano and Wallerstein’s concept of Americinity. Wallerstein rejects the employment of the nation-state as a unit for politico-economic analysis, advocating for the existence of a world-economy in which all the areas of the globe were participating (1974a: 390–91). Americinity, in a similar vein, refers to the turning point in the development of the capitalist world-system, namely the European arrival in the American hemisphere, whose consequent expansion of the land and practices of enslavement both accelerated the process of capital accumulation and provided an ideological (racial) basis for the necessary inequity that characterizes the system.

Americinity, moreover, accounts for the growth of US influence in the American hemisphere over what became peripheral areas. The capitalist nature of the modern world-system, a world economy born in the sixteenth century (Wallerstein 1974b: 67; 2004: 10) and expanded globally in the nineteenth (1974a: 390; 2011: xiii–xiv), is characterized by unequal exchange, as production is divided into core and periphery (Wallerstein, 2004: 23). Core production is controlled by quasi-monopolies and therefore obtains most of the surplus value, while the periphery needs to compete in the free market (Wallerstein, 2004: 23; 2002: 21). With Americinity, conceived with the European arrival in the American hemisphere, the capitalist world economy developed to its full and perpetually grounded the Global South to periphery production by implementing “variegated methods of labor control” based on a hierarchical idea of race (Quijano and Wallerstein, 1992: 549). Quijano and Wallerstein’s article also highlights that since the end of the nineteenth century the United States has acquired hegemony over the peripheral areas of the hemisphere and exerts its influence through projects of neocolonial development among others (1992: 155–6). This is the hemispheric aspect of the “US cycle” identified by Giovanni Arrighi, the last of four systemic cycles of accumulation (SCAs) that have succeeded each other since the inception of the world-system in the sixteenth century (Arrighi, 2010: 7). The US cycle reared its head in the late nineteenth century but only became fully consolidated after the Second World War when the material expansion already started at a hemispheric level was completed and the British Empire disappeared with the post-war global right to self-determination (Arrighi, 2010: xii, 60, 67).

It has been the focus of much scholarly work to analyse how nature has been exploited but also conceptualized by colonizers upon reaching the American hemisphere. Explorers’ texts about lands to be colonized range from describing a savage and menacing nature and thus promoting the human need to master and govern it (Adams, 2003: 17; Marx, 1964: 43) to portraying islands as empty paradises of abundance for the visitor to enjoy (Sherrard-Johnson, 2017: 240). In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt contends that the colonial control of the discourse of nature displaced subaltern knowledges (1992: 5), consolidated at a planetary level “bourgeois forms of subjectivity and power”, and facilitated “a new territorial phase of capitalism

propelled by searches for raw materials” (1992: 9). However, postcolonial ecocriticism is often limited to analysing colonial discourse and does not tackle the neocolonial strategies that have accompanied the US material expansion (Arrighi, 2010: xii). In the context of American neocolonialism, discursive mechanisms of power are arguably different, since neocolonialism is a discourse directed towards creolized postcolonial populations already familiar with Western cultures.

The US secured its hegemony in the world-system through the concatenation of three stages: an ascendant financial expansion that undermined its predecessor the British Empire’s hegemony, a material expansion of global trade and production, and a final phase resulting from the decay of US hegemony. This last phase has led to a process of financialization that has resulted in the strengthening of the previously expanded frontiers (Arrighi, 2010: xii, 312). The Caribbean was an early witness to all of these processes, as it was targeted as a zone of financial and material influence even during the first phase (Arrighi, 2010: 300), much earlier than in the rest of the world. The American domination of the Caribbean archipelago has also resulted in numerous diasporas of its inhabitants within the United States (James, 1998: 60) even though Caribbeans have had to struggle with the strengthening of frontiers that is characteristic of the third phase. However, the study of diasporic Caribbean literature does not usually pay attention to this diaspora; it seems more concerned with recording the migration of Caribbeans towards the former metropolises (the United Kingdom in the case of Anglophone Caribbean writers), as if Caribbean diasporas only occur in this direction.¹ One of the reasons why the Caribbean diaspora in the United States has not been studied as such might be that, upon reaching US American soil, authors are stripped of their Caribbeanness to become exclusively “racialized” or “ethnic”, impeding a more specific analysis of their regional origin and therefore precluding an analysis that tackles the US material and financial impingement on the islands and the diasporas this has created.

I am interested here in the work of Claude McKay (1890–1948) and Paule Marshall (1929–2019), who, as suggested in the paragraph above, are often categorized as African American rather than Caribbean authors in scholarship.² In fact, their novels set in the Caribbean, *Banana Bottom* (1933) by McKay and *The Timeless Place, the Chosen People* (1969) by Marshall, capture the experiences of the Caribbean people as they face the American influence upon their lands. Through their particular engagements with primitivism, they reflect key moments within “the long twentieth century”, a term proposed by Arrighi to define “a particular epoch or stage of development of the capitalist world-economy” in which the United States enjoys hegemony (2010: xi). Problematically, these novels incorporate female protagonists who embody the primitivist stereotypes promoted by the Modern/Enlightenment notion of rationalism that considered both women and black and indigenous peoples to be incapable of reason. However, their primitivist characteristics — an innate relation with nature and the land — are situated in relation to the agricultural landscape rather than “the [colonial] stereotype of lush tropical gardens that will bear fruit if one just poked a stick in the ground” (Lowenthal, 1972: 15). After an examination of how the novels play with primitivist discourse, particularly in relation to female stereotypes, this article concludes that they do not merely reproduce colonial narratives. Rather, they expose how the neocolonial enterprises of the United States relied on the domination of the land and its products during its processes of

accumulation. Thus, reflecting Quijano and Wallerstein's concept of Americanness, McKay and Marshall tackle in their novels key moments in the US acquisition of hegemony through their descriptions of the agricultural landscape. *Banana Bottom* focuses on the beginnings of the cycle described by Arrighi and the consequent migration of Caribbeans to the United States, while *The Timeless Place*, *The Chosen People*, maintaining the emphasis on the Caribbean diaspora, turns the discussion to neocolonial practices of and discourses on post-Second World War development of so-called Third World countries that just duplicate First World hegemony.

An ecofeminist reading of primitivism in the Caribbean novels of Claude McKay and Paule Marshall

After the publication of their first successful novels, which dealt with migrant experiences in the United States, both McKay and Marshall wrote a work set in their Caribbean homeland. By the time he wrote *Banana Bottom* McKay was already a best-selling author. The novel *Home to Harlem* (1928), narrating the adventures of Jake and Ray, African American and Haitian workers on the Pennsylvanian Railroad, as they enjoy the atmosphere of 1920s Harlem, became the first best-seller in New York written by a black author (Cooper, 1987: ix–x). *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is Marshall's second novel, preceded by *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), the work with which she built a reputation as an author. Set in a Brooklyn block mostly inhabited by members of the "Bajan" (Barbadian) diaspora, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* incorporates characteristics of a typical second-generation immigrant Bildungsroman. It is my contention that these two later works are set in the periphery to build a response to the power dynamics of Americanness, those which prompted the diaspora from the peripheral areas of the hemisphere (raw material producing areas) to the core countries. The novels explore the material conditions of the twentieth-century Caribbean to highlight the extent to which the United States has determined them. The writers, coming from the context of the Global North, are aware of the colonial stereotypes formerly employed to subjugate Caribbeans and thus ironically engage with them in a new context, American neocolonialism in the Global South. The results are narratives in which the islanders reclaim and appropriate the structures left by British colonialism that the US is determined to transform and change according to its interests.

A first reading of these novels is likely to note their primitivist features. Drawing on Alain Locke's "The Legacy of Ancestral Arts", Leah Reade Rosenberg describes primitivism as the embrace of non-Modern, non-European knowledges such as "heathen religions" (2007: 97). According to her, not all primitivism is a "colonial conception"; rather, it can actually denounce the coloniality underlying notions of modernisation (2007: 91, 98). However, primitivism is dangerous in that, even in its subversive form, it often reproduces the discourses that previously justified the colonized populations' submission, in particular about their supposed lack of rationality and consequent connection with nature. In Quijano's view, emphasizing non-European populations' apparent connection to nature responded to the rationalist Eurocentric perspective that saw "other races" — apprehended as uncivilized and irrational — as bodies without the ability to reason,³ hence "bodies closer to nature":

In a sense, they became dominable and exploitable. According to the myth of the state of nature and the chain of the civilizing process that culminates in European civilization, some races — blacks, American Indians, or yellows — are closer to nature than whites. (Quijano, 2000: 555)

This discourse was applied to women as well as to these “other races”. Indeed, many ecofeminists have highlighted that there is a similar “logic of domination” behind the exploitation of natural resources and of female bodies, especially colonized ones (Warren, 1990: 129). Problematically, as a way to hide this logic, women have been attributed an innate connection with nature too.

In *Banana Bottom* and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* some of the behaviours of the protagonists reflect Victoria Davion’s observation that “women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract” (1994: 9). The female protagonists seem to have an inexplicable and irremediable connection to their native lands even when, having grown up abroad, they lack any cultural connection to them. *Banana Bottom*’s Bita Plant grew up in England, yet on coming back to her native Jamaica she claims an unconscious and emotional connection to the island’s environment and traditions that English people on the island — with the same background and education as her — are unable to feel. In Marshall’s novel an American anthropologist in a development mission fostered by the United States encounters the people of Bournehills, who are described as incorrigibly attached to rudimentary means of subsistence and accused of sabotaging all the previous attempts at development undertaken in their village. They also seem to have a spokeswoman, Merle, who despite having been educated in England refuses to take part in the practices of the most “advanced” part of her island and is unable to last for long in “modern” jobs before being fired. Both novels, then, seem to suggest a mysterious intimate link between their Caribbean female figures and the environment.

Banana Bottom’s plot is based on Bita’s gradual reconnection with the town she had to leave and its native ways of life. Progressively, she realizes that she prefers its lifestyle, customs, and the people who enhance them to life at the missionaries’ parish in the town of Jubilee, where she lives on coming back from England. The narrator remarks that when confronted with the town’s natural environment she feels “pure joy”, described as “childlike and almost unconscious” (1933: 41). Throughout the novel Bita expresses feelings like this; natural and even cultural aspects associated with *Banana Bottom*’s peasant population appear to create uncontrollable emotional and bodily reactions. The insistence on the bodily aspects of Bita’s character development emphasizes that these affiliations are not mediated but natural and instinctive. Bita’s unconscious relationship with nature is complemented by other stereotypical attributes ascribed to women, including the maternal instinct. Her feelings of attraction towards native ways of life eventually transcend a connection with nature to culminate in her choice of a peasant husband, around which much of the plot revolves. Thus, the connection between the native physical body and nature is reaffirmed, particularly in terms of the female capacity for engendering, since earth was claimed to be “the mother of humankind” (Merchant, 1980: xxi). Bita’s journey of the recovery of her roots which starts with her return to Jamaica concludes with her motherhood, reinforcing the patriarchal assumption of the existence of innate female instincts.

The *Chosen Place's* protagonist Merle is also described on one occasion as a maternal figure. Genevieve Lloyd suggests that this is not totally unrelated to the lack of reason often associated with the natural world and described above in relation to colonized populations. According to Lloyd, the relegation of women to the private sphere and the family was also justified in terms of their inability to reason. Reason is expected to dominate in the public sphere, historically occupied by men (Lloyd, 1984: 74–79). In both cases, whether the female or the native, their representation as incapable of reasoning positions them as inferior beings, occupying a secondary role in society. Towards the middle of the novel, Merle is shown reading a story to the children from the almshouse:

She was seated on a bench beneath the large silk-cotton tree which offered the only shade to be found in the yard, and grouped around her on the ground were the dozen or so children of the almshouse, the orphaned and abandoned. From her gestures and their laughter it was clear that she was telling them a story, one of the things she did as part of the rather loosely defined job which Lyle had secured for her. (1969: 224)

The scene is idyllic and heartwarming, incorporating the tree which protects them and, later, the distribution of mangoes — the local food — for the children to eat. It characterizes Merle as the whole island's mother figure, who provides equal care and compassion for all the children in Bournehills.

Like Bitá, Merle lacks a cultural connection to the place, as she is relatively privileged and had studied and lived in England for a long time before going back to her native island. Nevertheless, on coming back, she refuses to join the citizens who, like herself, had acquired some money and formed a Westernized elite in the capital. She goes back to Bournehills, an apparently backward area where the inhabitants' rudimentary farming of sugar provides their daily means of subsistence. From the beginning, in the first chapter of a 472-page novel, she is shown in her everyday environment, struggling to drive up a hill because of the muddy mess that the rain had caused, and described in comparison with the hills which were the reason why a slave revolt had been possible in that area, an event which the villagers of Bournehills keep remembering and incorporate into their cultural identity: “[b]ut it had been despoiled, that face, in much the same way as the worn hills to be seen so piled around her on all sides had been despoiled—stripped of their trees centuries ago, their substance taken” (1984: 5). Merle is many times described in the novel both by characters and by the narrator as at one with the environment of Bournehills. For example, the American anthropologists comment: “[s]he's become too much a part of the place. In a way I can't explain, she somehow is Bournehills” (Lloyd, 1984: 118). Not only is she associated with the place in affiliative terms — “some larger figure in whose person was summed up both Bournehills and its people” (1984: 260) — but also in association with its natural geography, as is exemplified in her comparison to the surrounding hills, cited above.

The introduction of primitivism in the shape of these colonial stereotypes is intriguing and one wonders to what extent the stereotypes might work to denounce the neocolonialism that the novels portray as an invading force on the islands. However, one must be aware that the kind of nature depicted is not a savage and luscious one but a product of labour and subsistence. Quoting Édouard Glissant's celebrated dictum that “[o]ur landscape is its own monument [...] It is all history” (1989: 11), Elizabeth DeLoughrey

explains that the presence of agriculture in the Caribbean imagination relates to the current inhabitants' historical routes, making clear that "natural history [...] cannot be disentangled from the multiple settlements of human history" (2003: 308). Writing about *Banana Bottom*, Rosenberg points out that "McKay [...] invoked the folk and the romance in a time of fundamental societal change. Caribbean peasants were losing their land and emigrating because of the linked forces of largescale corporate agriculture and US imperialism" (2007: 96). What the characters are trying to preserve, however ambiguously described, is agriculture, an activity to which Caribbeans are indeed connected. Despite having inherited their agricultural lifestyle from British colonialism and slavery, they notice that the impending changes they are to face are determined by yet another instance of foreign intervention. Understanding the second Caribbean diaspora (the first one being the forced transportation of slaves) involves an awareness not only of the role of slave labour in the expansion of the capitalist world-system, but also of the Caribbean people's own labour, mobility, and dispossession in the precipitation of the US cycle.

Nature writing during the US cycle: The landscape of agriculture

The impossibility of perceiving nature as separate from labour is made clear in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* when at the beginning of the novel Vere, a character who comes back to the island after a three-year period working on a labour scheme in the United States, looks down from the plane's window. The sight reveals the landscape's domination by the Cane Vale sugar factory:

Hidden below to the left, where Westminster's long northern spur flattened out to almost level ground, was Cane Vale sugar factory, he knew. Cane Vale! where [sic] every morning as a boy he had taken his great-aunt Leesy's husband his eleven o'clock breakfast of rice and saltfish, before the latter had fallen into the deep pit which housed the rollers used to extract the juice from the canes, and been crushed to death. (1969: 14)

It is the sight of the factory that seems to connect Vere to his most recent ancestors on coming back to his homeland: his memory of an accident there evokes their shared labour and exploitation. According to Helen Tiffin, the presence of the landscape in Caribbean writing does not only represent "nature-in-itself" (2005: 199), but the result of human activity in the choice of which crop to cultivate or which plants to eliminate for the sake of agriculture. If we take a close look, most of the nature described in McKay's novel is the product of agricultural labour. In a paragraph describing Bitá's first impression of Banana Bottom, it is made clear that nature does not manifest in wild ways but is organized around "little fields" (1933: 50). Furthermore, the coffee described in the same paragraph as a "tropical plant" is not characteristic of the island but was introduced by the colonizers (see DeLoughrey, 2003: 299). Like Vere, what Bitá is observing is the human relationship with nature in the shape of labour and survival (and exploitation in some instances). Rather than embodying an unconscious primeval subject who connects with the natural world thanks to her femininity, we can read Bitá's portrayal as that of an intelligent individual who sensitively understands the struggles of her community as epitomized by their laborious cultivation of the land.

The man whom Bitá marries is Jubban, her father's "most reliable" drayman (McKay, 1933: 115). Significantly, she claims that Jubban "was superior in one thing. He possessed a deep feeling for the land" (1933: 291). The figure of the drayman has many implications here, as he is a reminder that the Caribbean attachment to land is not primitivist because nature is a means for subsistence. Understanding and caring for the land is essential for the Jamaican labourers in the novel in order to make their living. Jubban is not a primitive portrayal, as Kay R. Van Mol seems to contend when he defines Black consciousness as Bitá's ability to negotiate between her African heritage (represented by characters like Jubban) and its contamination by white education (1976: 52). Rather, he is a worker of the land who is devoid of any such mysticism. In this sense *Banana Bottom* shares with *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* a critique of dependency. Bitá's marriage to a labourer "becomes a primary means for the novel to address [...] the future of the Jamaican nation" (Dalleo, 2008: 59). By choosing her affiliation with the folk, Bitá contests the dependency which tied her to the Craigs. That is, Bitá's decision represents a political stand for a modern Jamaican state in which the peasants take control of their own resources.

In Marshall's novel, the shadow of dependency is more striking, as it is set in the post-Second World War era when theories of national development (the idea that certain nations were in an earlier stage of underdevelopment and they would gradually become developed if they adopted the right policies) were the Global South's adopted tactic to deal with the North–South economic gap (Wallerstein, 2002: 21). The Global North in turn quickly jumped on the bandwagon of development as it saw the possibility "to build its own global empire after 1945" (Power, 2004: 11) by making investments such as in tourist industries or multinational factories that ideally would provide the population with employment. While Marshall's novel clearly shows an awareness of this dependency between the United States and the Caribbean, gesturing to Europe's loss of relevance and the role of the United States in what seems a new colonialist regime, this awareness is also present in *Banana Bottom*, which depicts the beginnings of this change of cycle. *Banana Bottom* was published during the protectorate era of the United States, when Roosevelt's update on the Monroe Doctrine introduced the American military presence in the islands around Jamaica. In this way, the ecological disaster at the end of the novel — the drought and the hurricane happening while more and more Jamaicans migrate to the United States, the Panama Canal Zone, and "the vast banana and cocoa plantations [of Central America] that the Yankees were making" (McKay, 1933: 234, 237, 238) — foretells many changes for this agricultural community orchestrated by their powerful neighbour.

As such, we might ponder whose eyes are focalizing the primitivist descriptions of Merle cited above. We could well argue that much of what we see in the first half of the novel — mostly conveyed through the characters' dialogues — is mediated by the gaze of the anthropologists, especially the leader Saul, who despite his good intentions perpetuates Western notions of evolution epitomized in postcolonial development. According to decolonial thinker Arturo Escobar, "development can best be described as an apparatus that links forms of knowledge about the Third World with the deployment of forms of power and intervention, resulting in the mapping and production of Third World societies" (1995: 207). Though linked to colonization and Enlightenment forms

of knowledge through their philosophical foundations in the notion of linear progress (Watts, 1995: 4), ideas of development have been operative only since “the post-war period, when the apparatuses of Western knowledge production and intervention (such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and bilateral development agencies) were globalized and established their new political economy” (Escobar, 1995: 207). With this, Escobar questions the validity and origins of the definitions of “developed” and “undeveloped”. According to him, development’s logic of “catching up with the West” (1995: 209) carries with it the perpetuation and imposition of Western knowledge in the post-colonial world. When it is stated that Merle implied “that there were other, more profound, even mystical, reasons for the place being as it was” (1969: 215), what is being conveyed is Saul’s interpretation of Merle’s words. What she actually says is: “Bournehills is the way it is for a reason — that you people in town are too blind to see” (1969: 210). Note the significance of Saul’s implication that if he and his team are unable to see or understand something it must be because there is something supernatural about it. As Saul begins to understand the others’ reality and ways of thinking, his initial plans about the project also begin to shatter.

A key moment of the novel is when Saul spends a whole working day in the sugar fields with the cane labourers of Bournehills and seems to experience an epiphany. This episode does not seem to be motivated by any particular reflection, as Saul does not express any concluding thoughts about the nature of the villagers’ situation. He has in fact observed the same scene for many days, but not for the whole working session, just for some minutes or, at most, hours. His experience on the day of the epiphany does not seem to be anything special either, just the exhaustion that comes after a hard day of physical work under the sun. Saul observes that Gwen, a villager, was lively when she arrived, but that at the end of the day “she had fallen silent” (1969: 162). Stinger, Gwen’s husband, similarly stops uttering the triumphant sounds he usually makes when he cuts cane. Moira Ferguson’s suggestion that the day at the sugar field represents an illuminating experience about the position of these workers in the world order for Saul (2013: 43) does not seem to hold up, since at the beginning of the day their mood is lively and there does not seem to be any indication that their existence is unbearable to them.

Unlike Ferguson, I contend that the significance of the scene is symbolic. Saul steps into the villagers’ shoes for one day. Through a momentary chance to perceive life through the eyes of others, Saul is able to drift towards an eventual questioning of the usefulness and legitimacy of his role in Bournehills, that is, his role in development:

I’ve even wondered at times [...] whether my kind of work might not in a way be indirectly serving [the elite’s] ends, since all these projects, no matter how ambitious, are committed to changing things gradually and within the old framework. Perhaps whether I realize it or not, I’m really helping to keep the lid on things for Sir John and his kind, and therefore am as much a part of the system as they are. (1969: 226)

This claim stands in line with Escobar’s contention that “[s]eeking to eradicate problems, [development] ended up multiplying them indefinitely” through the creation of “abnormalities” that adapt to its Western imaginary of evolution (1995: 208), as is shown in the novel when the villagers actually defend their work in the sugar mills — even if it is

inherited from the plantation system — in opposition to the island’s modernization attempts when a multinational company tries to sabotage the factory. They also reject the aims of the only partly independent postcolonial government of the island to attract foreign businesses related to tourism. This technological modernization is not key to the community’s improvement but actually damaging for it, just as Justin Haynes suggests when he explains that Vere’s killing in an Opel car means that the technology brought by the West into this island is not meant to improve the islanders’ lives but the lives of the manufacturers (2017: 4). In sum, through what might appear to be a form of primitivism, the novel condemns what some characters perceive as humanitarian aid, exposing that its logic is not so different from the colonizing project.

Banana Bottom shows a similar awareness of the workings of the capitalist world-system during the US cycle through its descriptions of the precarious nature of competition in the peripheral areas. It is significant that Bitá’s romance with nature is preceded by the narration of an event which took place long before she was born: a coffee pool organized by Angus Craig, a local reverend, that attempts to circumvent the pressure put on periphery producers by core producers. The narrator explains that, depending on the season, coffee could be sold for less or more, and that the smaller peasants, “living with immediate needs from crop to crop” (1933: 18), were the ones most affected by these dynamics, since they had the need to sell during the worst seasons. Angus Craig convinced the peasants not to sell their coffee at all until the spring season when the price was usually higher, but the plan did not work. While the peasants blamed Angus Craig, the real reason, as explained by Wallerstein in terms of free market competition in the periphery, was that the big buyers turned to Brazilian coffee. This is how McKay sets the scene for Bitá’s appearance. The tone of the narrator during this chapter is similar to that of the final one, where the novel acquires the taint of a cautionary tale. This might encourage us to consider reading Bitá’s stereotyped fascination with the folk differently, in relation to what happens to the labourers on the margins of the story.

Facing the changes experienced within the world-system, the agricultural peasants in the novels, although having always been in a position of disadvantage within the process of unequal exchange, try to preserve the ways of life with which they are familiar. If they do not do so, they might have to face new tendencies that will still be controlled by the powerful states of the core-producing areas. This might also lead to their unwilling economically-determined mobility, as in the case of Vere. It is also the case of the sugar labourers in Bournehills who try to preserve their work in the sugar factory which they inherited from slavery rather than work in the tourist industry or in the factories built through previous development projects. At least, the sugar production process is, to a certain extent, controlled by them and their knowledge of the land. In *Banana Bottom* American domination is anticipated. After the drought, there is a suggestion that the situation could be advantageous in order to undertake a number of industrial developments. The narrator in McKay’s novel contends, however, that these developments would be hard to implement in an island which “was wholly agricultural” (1933: 231). The difficulty includes the abilities and affinities of the inhabitants, that is, the workers, who in this area of the world seem always to be destined to acquire forms of knowledge and mobility that are not their own. Therefore, it does not seem coincidental that the person who orchestrates these prospective businesses in *Banana Bottom* is “a Briton named

Evan Vaughan [who] had come to the colony as a young officer of the Salvation Army” (1933: 231). Similarly, in Marshall’s novel the government favours more profitable businesses like those related to tourism and owned by foreign investors. As DeLoughrey contends, in the Caribbean new forms of economy such as tourism work in the same way as the plantation; they do “little to sustain the local economy while fattening the wallets of industrialized Northern states and multinational corporations” (2003: 308).

Conclusion

The struggles of the characters in these two novels respond to the Caribbean’s position within the capitalist world-system and the American hemisphere. Wallerstein writes that it is almost impossible to locate the Caribbean out of the influence of one of the powerful agents that compose what he describes as the Triadic cleavage (the United States, Western Europe, and Japan) (2002: 17). In line with this, the struggles depicted in the novels are clearly not those of an autonomous exotic Caribbean universe but rather of the world. In the struggle for hegemony among these powers, the Caribbean is, according to Wallerstein, situated “basically in the US zone” (2002: 27), and, due to its smallness and consequent lack of geopolitical strength, unable to lead any movement of radical alterity or direct confrontation (2002: 28). Brian Bartell claims that Marshall’s Saul “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” (2020: 35). It could be argued that this mystery is the very impossibility of including in the project the interests of the people of Bournehills who seem to know better than Saul when they refuse both to celebrate the island’s independence and to participate in any development project at all.

In accordance with the theory of Americanness, these two novels emphasize the geopolitical relations between the United States and the Caribbean. In the era following the Second World War it was the United States that became the hegemonic force in the world-system (Wallerstein, 2004: 9) but Caribbean peoples began to perceive this much earlier. After the Spanish–American War, the United States

became the dominant and intrusive power in the Caribbean area. It acquired Puerto Rico, then the Virgin Islands, as colonies, and it turned a nominally independent Cuba into a protectorate, at least until 1933. It showed itself ready to send its marines wherever else it thought that its interests were threatened by local leadership. On the other hand, Caribbean nationals also began to migrate to the United States. (Wallerstein, 2002: 16)

The migratory tendencies across the hemisphere that derive from Americanness introduced Caribbeans to American racial politics: “Jim Crow ruled the [Panama] Canal Zone just as it ruled the American South” (Hathaway, 1999: 14). In another vein, Caribbeans settled in the industrial centres of the United States fuelled the development of radical politics among the black communities there (James, 1998: 1). It is striking, then, that a diaspora prompted by common motives has not been analysed in existing scholarship as a unified phenomenon but has rather been categorized by the language, racialization, or nationality of the migrants. It is hard to find full anthologies of what might be considered Caribbean-American literature, which could include writing by

McKay or Marshals but also by Eric Walrond, Piri Thomas, or Junot Díaz. Writings such as McKay's or Marshall's are often assessed as portraying the African-American experience. At the same time, it is common to see Black British writers defined as "Caribbean". In other cases, critics talk of national diasporas (particularly when their direction is towards the United States), thus associating the motives for migrating with the internal affairs of the country of departure. Anthologies of Caribbean writing such as *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* (2015) by Malachi McIntosh, and *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2011) edited by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell, suggest (with the exception of one brief chapter in the latter) that we might consider the Windrush generation more Caribbean than those who migrated in the wake of the United States' imperialist policies in the archipelago and who, upon touching North American soil, suddenly became "ethnic writers" (see, for example, the number of Caribbean writers included in the book *Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopaedia for Students*, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson (2015)). Why not call the latter Caribbean if their main reason for migrating is the impact of the workings of the capitalist world-system on their island nations?

The novels this article has analysed suggest that different modes of categorization are needed. McKay and Marshall locate Caribbean migration within Americanness's system of power relations. These are authors who in their novels, even, to some extent, in those not set in the Caribbean (but that is a matter up for another discussion), incorporate topics, imagery, and concerns that are endemic to the Caribbean. Further, their novels include multiple references to Caribbean–American relations and the hemispheric politics of migration, analysing the Caribbean diaspora in relation to American imperialism. As such, one would expect more studies that explore the Caribbean diaspora as a result of the financial and economic ascendancy of the US in the world-system and not only in relation to British colonialism and the return to the metropolis. Caribbean American writers like McKay and Marshall and, more specifically, their novels of return to the Caribbean, often obscured by the success of novels that depict the immigrant experience of racialized subjects in the US, reveal a political and economic structure not often reflected in scholarship or in anthologies. This alternative reading of *Banana Bottom* and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* opens up a path to consider a particular body of twentieth-century literature as transnational and, above all, hemispheric due to the changes in the cycles of power and hegemony that characterize the capitalist world-system.

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Notes

1. The problem when studying the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in the United States is that these studies do not usually adopt a regionalist approach. When there has been a regionalist analysis of the diaspora (although it has hardly ever transcended the realm of languages) this has usually focused on the diaspora in the United Kingdom (Van Nyhuis, 2012: 59). This is what is included in the category of “Black British literature”, which focuses on the work of writers coming from the former British Empire, including the Caribbean. Therefore, as part of this category, the particular history of the Caribbean in the context of the capitalist world-system that prompted colonization and the diaspora is considered. One example is the *Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), edited by C. L. Innes, which has a chapter devoted to “Black British writing” in which first- and second-generation migrant authors such as Grace Nichols, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, and Bernardine Evaristo feature. Another example is Michael Pearce’s *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* (2017), which considers the politics of creolization in the work of “British-Caribbean” playwrights. However, the analysis of these kinds of works in the context of the United States tends to be focused on minority languages (Latinx literature), national diasporas (Cuban American literature), or the racial history of the United States (African American literature), rather than on the postcolonial and neocolonial condition of the Caribbean islands.
2. Claude McKay’s significance to the Harlem Renaissance has prompted his categorisation as an African American writer in anthologies which most often do not acknowledge the role of his homeland, Jamaica, in the shaping of his poetics. Two examples are the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, and *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997), edited by William L. Anders, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. Marshall is also widely represented in anthologies of African American Literature such as *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (2011), edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Even the Caribbean poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who is part of the group of anti-essentialist critics that in the 1990s sought to transcend nationalism in the study of Caribbean art, defined Marshall as “an Afro-American of West-Indian parentage” (1970: 126). On the contrary, authors belonging to the Black British group who, like Marshall, were born in the diaspora, are very often categorized as Caribbean in existing scholarship.
3. According to Quijano, the secularization of society which culminated in Cartesian thought transformed the old religious division between soul and body into a dichotomy between reason and body. Hence, the corporeal was conceptualized in a more salient way when referring to populations deemed unable to reason (2000: 555).

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