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## „I Have Known Rivers”: Traumatic Memory and the Postcolonial Kunstlerroman: A Reading of Paule Marshall’s *Triangular Road*.

### Abstract

The kunstlerroman or „artist novel” unlike the related bildungsroman (novel of growth and development) has not received wide critical attention. Yet it may be interesting in the study of the novel to engage with sub-genres such as the kunstlerroman, especially since it traces the development of the artist, his/her arts and perspective. This paper is interested in exploring the kunstlerroman from a postcolonial viewpoint. Specifically, this paper focuses on how a memory of traumatic events and experiences contribute in the development of Paule Marshall’s artistic skill as expressed in her novel *Triangular Road*. It therefore engages with issues such as the place of individual and collective traumatic memory, the question of apprenticeship and how it is played out in the postcolonial variant of the kunstlerroman. It is also focused on how different the postcolonial kunstlerroman is different from the European version and what explains this difference. The main argument is that Marshall’s *Triangular Road* is a postcolonial kunstlerroman which traces her growth and development to artistic maturity, guided by her apprenticeship and against a backdrop of intrusive memories of the traumas and pains of her people. Therefore it insists that the postcolonial artist unlike those of the colonizing countries is largely influenced and formed by a series of traumatic events whose memories are triggered by „trauma buttons” and which push them in the present to pick up their pens. It underlines the fact that there is a close relationship between trauma, memory and the artistic development of Paule Marshall as expressed in *Triangular Road* which this paper considers as the postcolonial kunstlerroman par excellence.

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## **Introduction**

The *Kunstlerroman* subgenre has not received as much attention as the closely related *bildungsroman*, of which it is considered a sub-set. While critics have shown and continue to show interest in the *bildungsroman*, resulting in a plethora of criticisms of it, the *kunstlerroman* is only just beginning to attract such critical interest. This is even worse for the postcolonial variant which has only scant criticisms from scholars. This may be due in part to the fact that postcolonial writers (as the appellation indicates) have been more concerned with the reasons for their unique position as postcolonial and all it implies. The painful past of the colonial experience is what has captivated their attention, rather than the development of the artistic prowess of the colonized subject. Incidentally, it is this past which has played a central role in their artistic formation. This paper is thus interested in examining the role that the memory of trauma plays in the artistic development of Barbadian writer Paule Marshall as depicted in *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009).

The development and evolution of literary genres has most often depended on the group in the society that is exploiting it, the group's socio-historical background as well as geographical location and culture. Most often, marked or slight changes are noticed in genres as they move from one group to another, from society to another and from one culture to another. This paper which examines *Triangular Road* as a postcolonial *kunstlerroman*, underscores the idea that the artistic development of Marshall is closely related to the history of the slave trade and slavery both characterized by trauma. Thus for the postcolonial writer, memory plays a primordial role in the development of the writer as it serves not only as the major source of inspiration but is equally the reason which spurred them to pick up their pens.

## **The Concept of *Kunstlerroman* and a Brief History**

The term *Kunstlerroman* is a compound word. It is of German origin meaning „artist-novel”. It is a novel in which the central character is an artist of any kind (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2001). It is a sub-set of the *bildungsroman*, itself a subgenre of the novel. The *kunstlerroman* traces its origin to the Germanic Romantic tradition of the eighteenth century, when a generation of writers began to rebel against what they believed to be the confining rationalist structures borne of the Era of Enlightenment. They were therefore drawn to the freedom of artistic expression apparent in Romanticism and the beliefs of Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (*idem*). Goethe considered the writing as a means of personal contemplation. To him „a writer writes desirous to know his own internal cravings and emotions”. Not surprisingly, both the

bildungsroman and the kunstlerroman grew out of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796). Therein, Wilhelm the protagonist turns to art and becomes a playwright following his failure in love. This novel is thus considered as the prototype for both the bildungsroman and the kunstlerroman. The fact of their sharing a common origin can be explained by their mutual interest in some form of growth and development.

The Kunstlerroman is a form of life-writing which takes as its focus, the aspect of artistic development. Herein, the central idea is on the development of an artist from immaturity to full artistic maturity. It is the life story of the artist. Since most kunstlerromane highlight a problematic positioning of the artist towards art and society (Taylor-Jay 2002: 73), there was an expansion in the number of kunstlerromane at the end of the nineteenth century. This was provoked by „changes in the working environment of writers in the late 1700s- the decline of court patronage, and the advent of industrialization — and the consequent changes in aesthetics” (Taylor-Jay: 73).

The Kunstlerroman in its German birth place expressed a „preoccupation with the figure of the artist as a social outsider, who struggled with conflicts between the internal creative impulse and the external constraints of bourgeois social reality” (Martin 2002: 61). Thus the kunstlerroman characteristically portrays the artist as an outsider, viewed by peers and the society at large as fundamentally different if not outrightly rebellious. The genre, (much like the bildungsroman) crossed borders into Britain in the nineteenth century where it was adopted by English writers like James Joyce whose *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1916) became the standard bearer of the genre in English (OCD, 2001). It became a popular form since then, drawing readers into the world of the artist. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* outlined the following as characteristics of the genre:

Characteristics of the genre follow the formation of the artist almost as much as the art they strive to create. In a standard work of the form, the protagonist begins in a state of confinement, often in childhood restricted in their horizons either by the limitations of their home life or the interference of the people around them. Through force of will, they escape to another location, one far-removed from their origins and more hospitable to their dreams and desired vocation [...] though there are still crisis of confidence and struggles to succeed. Along the journey, they find education from a variety of sources, though often these teachers exist in the shape of two counteracting forces — one that nurtures the artistic career, and one that acts as an obstacle to their inevitable triumph. Ultimately, they reach a standard of success, often at a cost to their own wellbeing, either morally or physically.

As with other literary genres, or arts in general, the kunstlerroman was initially the exclusive domain of males. Thus the development of the female artist was not so much disregarded as non-existent because women were not expected to participate in public life. Definitions of femininity in the nineteenth century demanded that women content themselves with the domestic sphere. This is succinctly captured by O'Gorman (2002) who states that „Victorian women were not accustomed to choosing a vocation; womanhood was a vocation in itself” (qtd in Pourgiv 2002: 131). However, as women began making inroads into public life, a feminist perspective was added to the kunstlerroman.

In this female variant, it is revealed that coupled with the habitual challenges faced by all artists, the female artist „who attempts to grow up according to the pattern other than the one assigned to her by her culture finds her way obstructed“ (Shaw, qtd in Pourgiv: 138). Thus the female artist novel typically depicts the female artist facing the issue of gender in her artistic development and this constitutes a central feature in the female artist-novel. Thus Judith E. Martin states that „women authors share with their male counterparts a criticism of constricting social conditions that limit the artist's creative freedom, yet they also demonstrate the specificity of the social alienation of female genius“ (Martin: 62). The female artist is therefore caught between inner creativity and social expectations; whereby she has to attain artistic success at a higher personal cost than her male counterpart. So, female artist-novels typically depict heroines who at the height of the artistic achievement are unfulfilled in their personal lives. In her analysis of Madame de Staél's *Corinne* (1807), Martin underscores that the artist protagonist Corinne overcomes the special barriers to female artistic production at a huge cost. She explains:

But her artistic activity becomes an obstacle to her social integration when she cannot marry the man she loves because her status as a celebrated poet makes her an unsuitable partner. The conflict between love and art eventually leads to the annihilation of her creativity. Corinne's tragic fate exemplified for contemporary women writers the female artist's irreconcilable conflict between public success and personal happiness in love and marriage (62).

Martin then concludes that „*Corinne* suggests that female creative autono-my [sic] is not possible without the loss of love“ (66). The female kunstlerroman therefore brings to the male version, the issues of gender-based social constraints, alienation and the failure of integration; thus giving it a new twist. Thus Martin subscribes that „whether they [women] employed controversial or conformist narrative strategies, these two writers introduced subtly subversive elements into contemporary discourse on women and art, and provided an alternative vision of women's creative potential“ (71). Thus Evy Varsamopolou has underscored that:

If male artists have often felt their activities and aspirations estranged from the common lot of men, even at times to the point where in Kafka's work, the most rudimentary demands of life compromised one's devotion to art, and that therefore between the artist and society there must be an ineradicably hostile relation, then the female artist's position stands at the nadir of this inimical relation (9).

While women have been fully engaged in the exploration of the kunstlerroman, minority writers have taken few strides in that direction and this is matched by a near — absence of criticism of the postcolonial or minority kunstlerroman. However, it is good to note that some postcolonial writers have been engaged with this genre and they have inscribed within the artist-novel, the problematic of being colonized and its attendant problems. Their status as formerly colonized and the problems which accompany this such as questions of identity, social class, trauma of the past add a new turn to the artist-novel. Madelyn Jablon is among the few critics who have shown an interest in kunstlerroman

from minority groups. In her article *The Kunstlerroman and the Blues Hero*, she indicates some of the aspects peculiar to the African-American *kunstlerroman*. The major difference she highlights between the African-American and the European *Kunstlerroman* centres on the relationship that exists between the artist and the community. To her:

Artists in the black novels are often strongly connected to their communities and art often serves to strengthen this connection. Eighteenth — century African-American autobiographical narratives are evidence of the beginning of the tradition of the *kunstlerromans* that portray the artist as a representative or spokesperson of the community [...]. His talents are nurtured not threatened by the community (Jablon 1999: 57).

She thus concludes that „the African-American *kunstlerroman* [...] is a celebration of self and a celebration of community. It is this duality, this demonstration of counterpoint that makes it unique yet vital to the definition of the term” (70).

In the section that follows, it will be a question of first of all inscribing Marshall’s *Triangular Road* within the corpus of the *kunstlerroman* and then tracing her artistic development against the backdrop of a traumatic memory.

### **Traumatic Memory in Paule Marshall’s Artistic Self-fashioning**

Marshall’s text traces her career as a writer and for this reason it falls under the *kunstlerroman* genre. In fact it may be more apt to term *Triangular Road* a literary autobiography. This is so because, unlike other *kunstlerromane*, where the authors make use of fictional protagonists, Marshall in *Triangular Road* tells her story. Thus it can be described as the life-writing by an artist and of an artist, centred on his/her artistic development. The autobiographical aspect comes in as she focuses on herself as artist-protagonist. Also important to note at this point is the fact that she places her development as a writer on a parallel, albeit inverted movement with the trajectory of the slave trade (she being a descendant of slaves). This articulates the important place of memory in her artistic career. This first comes in from the title of the work which carries undertones of the Triangular Trade; the slave trade which brought her ancestors to work in the plantations of the New World. The title therefore point to an important interest in the work and this is the role of the memory of the traumatic slave trade in her artistic development. This idea equally comes to light through the choice of titles for the various sections of the book. Although, it chronicles her movement from a „fledgling writer to full maturity”, the table of contents has just the first part of the work with a literary title and this is „Homage to Mr. Hughes”. The next three sections are given titles that point to bodies of water; all of which played significant roles in the slave trade. Coupled with this is Marshall’s continuous use of „I’ve Known”, which bespeaks to the place of memory in her artistic self-fashioning and because what she has „known” are bodies of waters connected to the slave trade, it can be rightly concluded that it is not any kind of memory but one stained by trauma. Thus for the postcolonial writer like Paule Marshall, the past constitutes a powerful source of inspiration.

So, returning to the titles of the various sections of her memoir, the first part „Homage to Mr. Hughes” indicates the fact that it is all about art. This is first of all because

Langston Hughes was a prominent literary figure in America and especially amongst the African-American community. He was a kind of literary godfather figure to Marshall who contributed to her artistic growth. Madelyn Jablon has intimated that „In her collection of Essays *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker speaks of the importance of literary ancestors and the community to her work“ (57). This seems to be true of other postcolonial artists like Marshall who benefitted from her relationship with Hughes in terms of visibility and the promotion of her art. By opening her narrative through homage to Hughes, she is in effect drawing the reader into her artistic world. At the beginning when she is invited by the State Department to accompany Langston Hughes (at his request) on a cultural tour of Europe, she stresses on the support Hughes has accorded younger artists of his time:

Mr. Hughes as known for the support and encouragement he extended to the generations of younger writers like myself who began publishing in the 1950s and early 1960s. The poet Gwendoline Brooks, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, among others, have written of their indebtedness to him (3).

This homage paid to Hughes serves as basis for Marshall to proceed with the narration of her artistic self-fashioning and true to the kunstlerroman tradition she opens this narration indicating that she is at the „childhood“ of her artistic career. So following said invitation she exclaims „me, a mere fledgling of a writer, with only one novel and a collection of stories published to date, why would someone of his stature so much as consider a novice like myself?“ (3). At this point therefore, Marshall is at the nascent state of her career, with just two publications to boast of. In both cases, she recollects the role played by Hughes in the promotion of the books; where in the first case, he had travelled to celebrate with her on the favourable reviews her novel had received and „two years later, 1961 saw another instance of his thoughtfulness and support upon the publication of my second book, the collection of stories I mentioned earlier entitled *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*“ (5). She goes ahead to mention the „modest award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters“ for this collection, adding that Hughes might have well „been instrumental in my receiving the award — perhaps recommending the collection to those he knew on the academy's selection committee“ (5). Novice that she is at this stage in her career, she receives the encouragement from the well-established Langston Hughes such that when he invites her to accompany him to Europe, she recounts that „I also made sure to take along my one and only novel that Mr. Hughes had helped launch. Perhaps I might find a European publisher for it“ (12). Langston Hughes had also been instrumental in Marshall's choice of career as a writer. This is because, prior to her meeting with him, she had read his works as a teenager and these had inspired her to become a writer. She recollects „I had read *The Big Sea* as a teenager and I had privately vowed even back then, to follow the example of its author. Not only would I become a writer, but a travelin' woman as well“ (29). A reading of the first section of *Triangular Road* confirms my view of it as a kunstlerroman. This is because its main focus is on the growth of an artist.

The next section captioned „I've Known Rivers: The James River” commences the interplay between Marshall's artistic coming-of-age and traumatic memory. This is especially underlined at the level where for seemingly no „apparent” reason; she digresses from the narrative of her creative art to focus on the James River. This is explained when she comments on the importance of this river to the transatlantic slave trade. She writes:

Indeed, it was the combination of the white water power of the James fueling the new industries, together with the tidewater offering safe passage to the ships up from the Atlantic, with their chattel cargo, that made for the wealth the Old Dominion would enjoy for nearly two centuries (45).

And here by „chattel cargo” she is referring to the slaves that were shipped into the New World and so she adds that „Richmond, VA. It was the principal port of entry for Africans bought to the New World in the eighteenth century” (17). That Marshall would (seemingly) depart from, indeed puncture her „main” narrative to dwell at length on the slave trade and the nature of the entry of slaves into the USA speaks volumes. It is indicative of what important place this has on her as a descendant of slaves. The psychological impact of this slave heritage comes to light when in the course of witnessing a parade, she suddenly imagines herself as a slave transported to be sold: „for a hairbreadth of a second, time reverses itself: it's no longer the 1980s, nor am I my present-day self; a writer and an itinerant teacher of writing. Instead I am suddenly chattel cargo, merchandise, goods, a commodity to be bought and sold [...]” (51). As a descendant of slaves, landmarks and certain events evoke traumatic feelings in her. This is further seen when on one occasion, her editor gleefully announces to her that her husband is taking her to see the plantations. Marshall recounts thus:

Unaware of their plans, I had dropped by to leave off a section of the novel I'm presently working on only to be met by my normally poised fifty-year-old editor a quintessential New York type, suddenly behaving like a five-year-old who's just been promised a trip to Disneyland (57).

Marshall's editor, insensitive to Marshall's past considers a trip to the plantations as a tourist outing, but for Marshall the pain is enormous such that she says „For a moment I stand nonplussed, taking in her cute little dance; then, is all I can do not to vault up and grab her by the arms [...]” (55). Shortly after this Marshall ends her association with her. For a descendant of slaves, any reference to the plantation can only elicit such a response as it only leads her to think of „all those centuries of hard back, donkey work done gratis” (58) by her ancestors. Thus in this second section of the book, Marshall exposes her heritage as well as that of the millions of blacks in the diaspora. This issue runs through many of her novels as the blurb to *Triangular Road* testifies „she explores many of the same issues of identity and heritage and history that are at the core of her classic novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones, Praisesong for the Widow*, and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*” (Blurb).

In the third part of *Triangular Road* subtitled „I've Known Seas: The Caribbean Sea”, she recounts her visit to Barbados to work on her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

In a sense, it can be said that it is in this section that she gets fully engaged in narrating her artistic coming-of-age. But even before she gets into that, she pauses and underlines that „Barbados being, circa 1600, as important a holding pen and transshipment point as Richmond, Virginia, would become, circa 1820 [...]“ (61). This underscores the central position of the slave past in her art. She goes ahead to narrate the stories of the „incorrigibles“, that is, slaves who by sheer force of will refused to be broken by the British slave masters. She thinks her grandparents must have been amongst the incorrigibles left behind by the British on the Island. Marshall would later visit Barbados to meet her grandmother, fondly called M'Da-Duh by her children. This would serve as inspiration for many an artistic creation as she intimates „Decades later, still taken with her authority, I would write a story about her and her Island world. Indeed she appears in one guise or another in every book I have written“ (70).

Moving on to her artistic development, Marshall intimates that as early as four, she seemed to have chosen her career. This is when in posing for the traditional picture all Bajans take at the age of four, she places her hands on a children's book adding „willful, own-ways, I had also already chosen my life's work“ (84). At twelve, she asks the white librarian for a list of books by coloured writers which doubtlessly played a role in her artistic formation as it is probably at this point that she came in contact with Hughes' *The Big Sea*. Another important influence is her mother and her Bajan friends who regularly met at her mother's kitchen. She and her sister sat listening to these women conversing in the kitchen and she writes of them: „the mothers were skillful raconteurs as well. A few among them, including Adriana, were acknowledged to be superlative talkers and master storytellers“ (88). Marshall would later recognize this as a primary source of her creativity:

I couldn't have known it at that time, but I had my first lessons in the art and craft of writing while being forced to listen to Adriana and her friends in the kitchen at 501 Hancock. Decades later, I would christen them the „mother poets“ and pay grateful homage to them in an article „The Poets in the Kitchen“, which was published as part of a series on the „Making of a Writer“ in the New York Times Sunday Book Review (89).

Unbeknownst to her mother that she is more or less the source of her daughter's creativity, she stands against her choice of writing as a career: „College? Book writing! Look you get from out my eyesight! You ain' hear that the telephone company is starting to hire colored? You best march yourself down there and beg for a job“ (95). This falls in line with one of the characteristics of the kunstlerroman mentioned earlier where the artistic stirrings are met with hostility from the home environment. This follows another characteristic which is the idea of practicing art in secret given the hostility. This comes out when Marshall intimates that „above all and again secretly, I was writing a novel on the sly, my first and soon even progressed with it to the point of considering possible publishing houses, starting with the best known among them (95).

Marshall is here recounting the birth of her first novel which marks the start of her career. She moves on to relate her discussion with Hiram Haydn the editor of Random House which had agreed to publish her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. At the end of this discussion and with advance payment in hand, she is advised to go somewhere cheap

and edit her work. Instinctively she chooses Barbados to which Haydn replies „from this book of yours, I think you should go there” (97). Barbados, the place of origin of her parents is important to this first novel which focuses on the immigrant Barbados community in New York. A somewhat autobiographical novel, questions of black heritage, ethnicity and identity are central, all of which she can now only access through memory.

In Barbados, she would lodge at a boarding house owned by a Mr. Watson who in turn served as inspiration for a later novel as she recounts „I would later write a story about old Mr. Watson and his colonial showpiece. It would be part of a collection about old men called Soul Clap Hands and Sing, the title taken from a poem by W.B. Yeats on the subject of aging” (100).

Marshall’s artistic development is seen in her editing of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The process of trimming and pruning the manuscript to perfection can be read as the shaping of her own very artistic prowess. She writes:

Once settled, I got down to work overhauling the bloated baby tome of a novel. Using Hiram Haydn’s notes and suggestions as well as my own instincts, I began eliminating what I soon came to see were the excesses burdening the narrative, impeding its pace. All that highly decorative prose that called attention to itself! Style overwhelming rather than serving the story! Worst was the surfeit of details! [...]. Long hours were spent painstakingly cutting away the fat [...]. It was somehow up to me, the underdog, the weakling to pin the behemoth to the mat and strip it of every superfluous word (101).

The above excerpt relates how Marshall goes about the creation of her first artistic work. At this point, she is still at the nascent stage of her career and so she says „days- long, solitary days, weeks and then months spent learning the painful but necessary lesson of every novice, that writing is rewriting, is honing, pruning, refining, is becoming essentially one’s own unsparing editor” (101).

At this juncture, she once again makes recourse to slave the history of slavery. This time around, disturbed by her father’s silence concerning his past, which has created gaps in her lineage, she decides to fill these gaps by claiming a bloodline with all slaves and therefore their story becomes hers as well.

It is while in Barbados that the inspiration for another novel comes to her. She writes:

Although the Scotland visits were a much-needed break from the writing, I invariably brought the work along in my head. There was much cutting, revising and fine-tuning still to be done. Moreover part of my mind was also being taken up with the next book I intended to write. This new book another novel, was increasingly taking over my thoughts (114).

For this novel, inspiration is drawn from the scene of an accident she witnesses. Over the angry screaming of the drivers and passengers from both vehicles involved, she is drawn to one woman who stands apart from the others with a sheaf of cane on her head. Marshall tried to imagine what is going through this woman’s mind as she has a faraway look on her face. She thus imagines that this woman „was walking back toward another place and another time altogether [...]. Her unsightly feet taking her back to some past event that I imagined was of far more importance than the squabble at the roadside”

(116). It can be said that since Marshall does not have access to this woman's thoughts, she is simply projecting her thoughts unto her. By imagining what is going through the woman's mind, she is in effect revealing what is going through her own mind. Through this woman therefore, Marshall is able to go back in time to the Easter Sunday Morning Uprising of 1816. This failed uprising which had been masterminded by Bussa and Nanny Griggs served as inspiration for Marshall's novel as she confirms: „Years later they would also serve as inspiration for my second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*“ (117). Ten months later, she was through with the revisions of her first novel and eager to show Haydn and commence with the new novel she had in mind. Although Marshall suggests that it was the accident scene that inspired this story, it is clear that inspiration rather comes from the past. As she remembers the failed uprising of the slaves, she becomes inspired to draw from there to create her novel, hence the place of memory and trauma in her artistic self-fashioning.

The next stage in Marshall's artistic coming-of-age follows the publication and reception of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She writes that „when news arrived that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* had won a Guggenheim Award, the most generous and prestigious literary prize after the Pulitzer, the first thing I did was to phone Mr. Hughes and again thank him for having written the letters of recommendation that I'm sure helped me to secure such a bonanza of a grant“ (120). Following this grant, she travels to Grenada to work on the next novel. When she gets settled in she prepares a space specifically for the writing of her novel as she narrates: „also, as a gift to myself, I created my own private workspace apart from the house by using the servant's room out back [...]. It was my Virginia Woolf „room of one's own“ to which, Woolf insisted every woman writer is entitled“ (125). Next she reveals the kind of novel she is intending to write as follows:

Also on top of the desk in plain view was my most valuable possession: the research material I had spent months amassing for the book I intended to write. What I had in mind was something of a historical novel, although not in the strict sense of the genre. It would be set in the present, the characters would be modern day folks of various races and backgrounds yet their lives, their situations, their relationships, their thinking and politics would reflect the past four-hundred-year history of the hemisphere and its continuing impact on them (126).

Here, Marshall's preoccupation with the past is evident as well as the impact of that past on individuals and groups. It underlines the fact that her memory of various events serve to bolster her art and she is constantly in dialogue with this past as she moves from one novel to the next. At this stage of her artistic development, she still considers herself a novice. This is when she suffers a „writer's block“ which she finds difficult to overcome. So she concludes „I was still a novice after all, someone with only one novel and a collection of stories to her name [...]“ (127). She expounds on the various strategies she employs to overcome this „block“: „one strategy I employed was something I call «throw-away writing». I would churn out page after page of the story I wanted to write, but in prose of such poor quality it as fit only for the wastepaper basket [...] although inferior, the «throw-away writing» could at times offer up a word, a phrase, even a sentence that made for a breakthrough“ (128). When this fails, she tries another: „another tactic I tried came again from Mrs. Woolf's manifesto „the female writer must be allowed to sit and

stare, and for however long she chooses [...]” (128). Thus Marshall draws the reader into the world of her artistic growth complete with the challenges and struggles to emerge as a mature writer.

Furthermore, when Marshall visits the small Island of Carriacou in Grenada, she participates in the annual festival Drum/Nation Dance ceremony. During this dance the people of Carriacou acknowledge their past by claiming various nations of Africa as their nations of origin. This appears to be their way of coping with the physical and cultural displacement occasioned by the slave trade. This memory of the trauma of displacement, coupled with the U.S invasion of Grenada years later became for Marshall, the source of inspiration for her next novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. She elucidates:

For me, the idea for a novel I would write almost a decade later grew out of this overnight trip to what I would always think of as a time capsule of an Island. I was scarcely aware of it back then. Yet the sense of a possible story had nonetheless implanted itself, was ‘on hold’, so to speak, in the memory bank of my mind beyond consciousness. Writing fiction: a wonderfully conscious and unconscious act.

*Praisesong for the Widow* would be the name of that future novel. In it, a well-heeled black American widow, an unapologetic bourgeoisie, given to her yearly cruise, recovers something of her true-true self after experiencing the carriacou Big Drum/Nation Dance (147).

Her participation in the dance not only inspires her next novel but equally releases her from the „writer’s block”. This is so because, the minute she returns from Carriacou, she is able to write the story she had been unable to as she indicates:

Then, back in the V. W. room, I sat down at the Royal [...] and began writing my novel, finally understanding, fledging that I still was, that as a fiction writer, a novelist, a storyteller, a fabulist, as it were, my responsibility first and foremost was the story, the story above all else: the old verities of people, plot and place, a story that if honestly told and well-crafted would resonate with historical truths contained in the steno pads. All would be there for those capable of reading in depth (148).

Although Marshall still refers to herself as a fledgling here, one fact that is clear is the maturity she has attained as far as creativity is concerned. She has come to understand that the essence of her art is storytelling and this should surpass every other consideration. So, just like the protagonist in *Praisesong* discovers her „true true” self after participating in the Dance festival, so too does Marshall discover her talent. Thus free from the block she writes the novel effortlessly.

The final section of the narrative titled „I’ve Known Oceans: the Atlantic” is set in Africa, precisely in Nigeria. Here Marshall is part of the official American delegation to participate at FESTAC — the World Festival of Black and African Arts. The purpose of this festival was to celebrate the ending of colonialism by bringing together artists, writers and scholars from the entire African continent and from the African Diaspora. This last part of the text seems to be the platform for the convergence of postcolonial art and traumatic memory. The festival in itself points to this inextricable connection. The

fact that artists come together to celebrate the end of colonialism — a traumatic event in their lives — bespeaks this fact. For Marshall, it is the peak of her sense of trauma as she finds herself face to face with the place where it all began — Africa. This comes out when she recollects the excessive applause accorded the American delegation by the Nigerian crowd:

Indeed, the outsized, nonstop welcome was like a traditional West African praisesong [...]. Its excessive length was also partly driven, I sensed, by a large measure of guilt and sorrow [...]. Because hadn't their forebears been complicit, some of them, in the nefarious trade, that had reduced ours — [...] — to mere articles of trade, commodities, merchandise, goods, cargo, chattel cargo to be bought and sold and whipped and worked for free! And hadn't that commerce continuing for five centuries left us, their descendants [...] feeling at times like permanent Displaced persons? (160).

The underlying traumatic memory that has fueled Marshall's artistic zeal up till now has been the slave past. This encounter with Africa where the trade started and from where her ancestors were taken brings this trauma to the surface. It is her confrontation with and acceptance of the fate of her ancestors that marks her maturity.

Marshall's *kunstlerroman* employs different narrative levels. First of all there is the linear movement of her artistic maturation which I have traced here. It is this narrative that captures and presents snapshots of her artistic growth, the sources of her inspiration, the highs and lows of her career. Another narrative level present in her work is what appears to be a backward journey from the USA to the Caribbean and eventually to Africa. I term this journey „backward“ because it retraces the route through which slaves were taken to the New World, from the New World back to Africa. Given that the slave trade and slavery still constitutes a major source of trauma for slave descendants who still grapple with questions of identity, home and exile, this retracing then constitutes the traumatic memory that is central to Marshall's artistic self-fashioning. This explains why she undertakes a simultaneous and parallel narration of her artistic formation and the slave trade. From a metaphorical perspective, these journeys undertaken by Marshall can be read as slices of her memory as she seeks to understand her place in the world as a permanently displaced person. The bodies of water which she uses to caption the different sections of her memoir all played important roles in the transportation of slaves to the New World. That she chooses this method of captioning the various parts of the work, shows her in dialogue with the past. She interweaves the story of her artistic development with the rivers, seas, oceans she has known to show how the trauma of the past is alive in the memory.

## Conclusion

Marshall's *Triangular Road* integrates different literary traditions in tracing her artistic evolution. She engages the autobiographical genre, through which, she presents aspects of her life, family and community. The fact that the *kunstlerroman* is part of life-writing justifies this. Thus it is through this that she is able to inscribe her literary autobiography by chronicling her life not just as an individual but most especially as an artist. She also explores the African-American slave narrative. A popular and possibly forebear of African-American literature, this genre served to expose to the world, the ways in

which slavery dehumanized the blacks as a means to popularize the abolition project. Marshall's exploitation of this genre in her text highlights the place of trauma in her artistic coming — of — age. That she makes numerous allusions to the slave trade underlines how preoccupied she is by the painful past. By bringing in these other literary traditions on her artist-novel, Marshall not only twists the *kunstlerroman* to adapt it to her colonial experience, but underscores the idea that for the postcolonial artist, the road to maturity can never be the same for the European counterpart.

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