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An Interview of Paule Marshall

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AN INTERVIEW WITH PAULE MARSHALL

This Interview was conducted at the home of Paule Marshall in Richmond, Virginia, on June 14, 1991.* Much of our discussion focused on Ms. Marshall's recently completed novel, *Daughters*, published this fall by Atheneum, which she characterizes here as "perhaps my most personal novel." There are, of course, frequent references to her earlier works, which include *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961). *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and *Reena and Other Stories* (1983).

DD: When you spoke at the Humanities and Sciences Lecturer Award program at Virginia Commonwealth University, you talked a little bit about it? How did it come about?

PM: I like to think that the seed for the novel was a quote I came across about eight years ago in, of all places, a dance program. I was sitting in City Center Theater on West 55th Street in New York waiting for the lights to dim and the curtain to go up on a performance of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. While waiting, I was leafing through the program and I came across an epigraph to one of the dances. I don't remember the name of the dance, but the epigraph struck me. It read, "Little girl of all the daughters,/You ain't no more slave,/You's a woman now." That line struck me, stayed with me. I don't remember anything else about that evening. I don't know if it was really that good a performance. I couldn't tell you the name of the dance, but I remembered that epigraph because suddenly there it was, a kind of James Joyce moment of epiphany when a meaning or a theme that has been eluding you suddenly comes clear. It had that kind of impact. "Little girl of all the daughters,/You ain't no more slave,/You's a woman now." The quote gave: the idea for a story about a group of four or five women--black woma wandering around backstage in my mind like the lost souls in Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The characters in my head were waiting for me, the author, to come up the right story for them. And suddenly there it

was that night in Center Theater: the sense of the story I wanted to write about the could finally get these women out from backstage, out from the shadows, and onto center stage. Daughters was born that night.

DD: For the benefit of those who haven't had an opportunity to read novel, can you tell us a little something about the story that you about these women.

PM: I'll try. Like most of my novels, Daughters is about people, politics, culture, history, race, racism, morality, marriage, children, friends love, sex, the triumph and sometimes defeat of the human spirit, as as a few other things I threw in for good measure. Seriously, it's the story of a family, a marriage, and of the young woman, Ursa Mackenzie, who is the sole issue of this marriage. Ursa is of dual American through her mother, a schoolteacher from Connecticut West Indian through her father, a leading politician on one of lands, a man known all his life as "the PM," the Prime Minister. Daughters is, in part, the story of Ursa's struggle to come to terms not only with her family, especially her father, but with the two worlds she America, where she lives, and the island where she spent her childhood. The novel is about the long hard battle we sometimes have to achieve true autonomy. Daughters is also about the array of women have an impact on Ursa's life in one way or another. These the "daughters" of the title. Ursa, in turn, is the little girl of "daughters." They're an odd lot, these women. They're from backgrounds, two different parts of the world, even different time. They range from a long-ago slave woman by the name Jane, who became a warrior, to Ursa's mother, Estelle, a Delta soror, who falls in love with this man everyone calls "the PM," marries him, and goes to live on the island I call Triunion. It's the of their marriage and the problems of a personal, political, and t nature Estelle wrestles with over the years. Estelle's story is an significant part of the narrative.

DD: Can you speak about Estelle and her relationship with this marriage between the American and the West Indian? And marriage reflective of your own experience? Can you say if conflicts or issues in the relationship of Estelle and the PM were inspired by any situation that you experienced or knew?

PM: Well, it's a mixed bag when it comes to the sources. Yes, I drew in part on my own experiences as someone who was once married to a West Indian with political ambitions, but I also made use of what I perceived to be the experiences of other people I came to know during the periods I spent in the Caribbean. But not in any direct way. It's always in bits and pieces. As with everyone, everything that has happened to me, that I have experienced firsthand or heard about or read about--however it's come to me--it's all stored in the data bank of the mind, this repository, this hopper. And in creating a story, in creating Daughters, I simply go to the data bank and select--and that word is crucial--select what I need, those elements that will help me tell this particular story. What I don't find I invent. I'm always inventing. I find that the most exciting, challenging, and fulfilling aspect of writing fiction. My imagination is always working overtime. And it's true, you know, that certain aspects of my life or the lives of friends or something I have read, et cetera, will trigger the idea for a story because it speaks to something deep within me. Yet the material drawn from reality, that I take from my life and other lives and what I've seen and experienced, is always altered, is always transformed; it's always reordered to fit the fictional reality that I'm creating.

DD: But are there no individuals whom you might be able to cite as direct influences on characters in *Daughters*?

PM: As direct influences or direct sources? Not really, because my characters for the most part are always composites. I'm always creating my people out of fragments of any number of people I've known. Sometimes they are just outright inventions: for example, the PM's keep-miss, or mistress, in *Daughters*, the woman Astral Forde is a total invention.

DD: Yes, but I'm sure you've known a lot of keep-misses.

PM: That's right, and I used them as a base for my invention.

DD: You commented in an interview in *Wasafari* that "the books express my search." To what degree does this novel reflect your personal search?

PM: The writer Ralph Ellison has an interesting theory that might help me answer your question. In an essay of his on the relationship of the writer to his/her work he uses the phrase "completion of personality." By that he means that the writer, without being conscious of it, often injects into the work deep-seated and oftentimes troubling aspects of the self, and in thus externalizing them achieves a kind of completion of personality, a filling in of the gaps that can bring the writer closer to wholeness and healing.

Something like this happens with me vis-a-vis the work, I suspect. All of my novels and stories come out of questions I'm always putting myself, sometimes without being fully conscious that this is what I'm doing. Writing novels and stories is my way of seeking answers. For example, one of the questions I'm always putting to myself is How do I as a woman--a black woman--and a writer continue to function and to grow in a society that almost daily assaults my sense of self? That question part prompted my writing the novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. Also how does one grow old in youth-struck America? Another question which that novel sought to answer.

In the case of *Daughters*, writing it permitted me to deal with a number of concerns that have preoccupied me for years. The ship of black men and women, for one. Through Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, the long-ago slave heroes; through Estelle and the PM in early years of their marriage; through even the little boy, Robeson his friend Dee Dee I could express my hope for reconciliation, love, and unity between black women and men. It's a plea for dialogue, for a willingness to reach out and support and save each

How do individuals, how do countries and cultures achieve dependence? Another question that I'm seeking to answer in *Daughters*.

At the individual level, it's Ursa's search in the novel. In context of culture and society we see the irony of her father's the PM: that it is an empty symbol of power and authority in a that still takes its orders from America and the West. The battleship, the *Woody Wilson*, comes to supervise each election. "How do you live under the shadow of that red rock?" to quote T. S. Eliot. under the seduction of another's values and the domination of the Her-renvolk? Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe

suggested "the way" long ago, as do other, more contemporary characters in the novel. It's about the coming together, the working together not only of black men and women, but of the entire black community throughout the world. Idealistic, I know, romantic even-I've been accused of both--yet the possibility, the necessity of that union sustains me.

DD: Let me ask you about the setting of a large part of the novel. West Indian island of Triunion. Was the name Triunion designed specifically to indicate that idea of bringing together?

PM: Oh yes. Very much so. Triunion. Pure invention again, and pieces of a topographical and cultural nature were borrowed from a number of islands to fashion it. They include Haiti and its next-door neighbor, the Dominican Republic, as well as several of the English-speaking islands. I wanted to create a place that would represent the three major colonial powers in this part of the world: the English, French, and Spanish. Again, my obsession with history. My Triunion was once under all three flags and although "independent" (in quotes), it continues to suffer from those divisions. The place is meant to suggest the weakness that comes from disunity. It's meant to suggest all the poor countries and communities, including the African-American community here, that fall prey to the seduction and domination of their former colonial masters because of disunity. Perhaps it's an impossible dream, but I long for the day when the islands of the Caribbean--English, French, Spanish, Dutch--will come together in some kind of federation or European-style political and economic entity. It's the only way I believe they will be able to come out from under the shadow of Big Brother to the north, be able to achieve real strength and thus be taken seriously in the councils of the world.

DD: You've mentioned Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, and I notice in this novel as well as in *The Chosen Place* that you deal with slave rebel heroes. I suppose these are combinations also of the actual historical figures. I know there is a Cudjoe. To what degree were this hero and this heroine based upon actual slave figures?

PM: Before I answer the question directly let me say something about my interest in history, especially the history of black people in this hemisphere. By the time I got to high school I realized that the history taught me, the little bit of history taught me about black people, was far from the truth. I sensed that early on. Somebody was lying through their teeth to me, trying to undermine my spirit and my sense of self. Really out to defeat me and those like me. Then there was the happy ducky, the faithful Dilsey, the tragic mulatto, the nigger wench. *Stepin Fetchit* was a favorite in the movies of my day, as was the bug-eyed *Mantan Moreland*; images that peopled my childhood in books and the movies, especially the movies.

History was an Africa without civilization and art, was West Indians as monkey chasers and African-Americans as mammies and Amos and Andies, black people denigrated at every turn. And so part of my preoccupation with history in the work is my need to set the record straight, if only for myself; to get at the whole story. History to me is an antidote to the lies, and I'm interested in discovering and in unearthing what was positive and inspiring about our experience in the hemisphere--our will to survive and to overcome. We have the unique opportunity to create, to reinvent ourselves. Since so much that's been said about us--all those negative and unflattering

portrayals-was designed to serve the fantasies and motives of the larger society and had little to do with us, we can declare it all null and void, all that stuff, and fashion a self for ourselves that's more truthful and more complex. And I think that knowing and understanding history is an essential part of that endeavor. And that's why there's always the emphasis or the concern with the past in my work

But to answer your question about the slave heroes, Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, in *Daughters*, I portray them as co-conspirators, co-leaders, consorts, lovers, friends. They are inventions essentially, but inventions based on a number of black heroic figures both here in the States and in the West Indies that I have come across in my reading. For Congo Jane I drew on the famous Jamaican heroine, Nanny of Nanny Town, who founded the self-sustaining Maroon colony in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica back in the early eighteenth century. The West Lucille Mair has written extensively about Nanny and other rebel en of the period. The crucial role that they played in the resistance has received, of course, little attention in the literature. It was important to emphasize in *Daughters* that it was Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, the main point being that slavery, as painful and traumatic as it was, theless was a time when black women and men worked and together in a greater spirit of unity, mutual support, and been referred to as equality under the lash. Lucille Mair examines her work, as does Angela Davis in a seminal essay that appeared *Black Scholar* some years ago. So it's all about that. It's about the tion and lessons that history has to offer us. That's what really me.

DD: When in college, Ursa wants to write her senior thesis on lationship of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, and her professor approve her topic. Was that your personal experience?

PM: No, although I've heard any number of similar stories from students. I simply wanted to make the point that there is a good resistance on the part of even the most liberal whites to admit the positive and even triumphant aspects of the African-American experience in this part of the world.

DD: Indeed to deny them.

PM: Yes. To deny them. That's what Ursa experiences at the her white "liberal" professor. And it becomes a kind of miss to write about Congo Jane.

DD: Speaking of powerful black women, let's talk about old family retainer in the novel and another one of the daughters title. She's a very interesting figure, and I thought about Jean similar character, Christophine, when I was reading your *lestine* to any degree influenced by her?

PM: No, not at all. Christophine... Celestine--the names are close, but that's about all. I read *Wide Sargasso Sea* many years ago and remember little of it. My Celestine, the young nursemaid who initiated the PM sexually when he was a boy and then the older woman who helps raise Ursa, is, along with Congo Jane, an ancestral figure in the novel. Celes-tine is based largely on my maternal grandmother. Although my grand-mother has been dead for many years now, she remains an important presence in my life and in my work. She appears in one guise or another in most of my short stories and in all of the novels. She embodies for me that long line of unknown black men and women who are my forebears. It's about creating a history for myself. I once wrote a story about

her called "To Da-duh, in Memoriam." Da-duh was her nickname. Most of the story was straight out of my imagination since I only knew her briefly and I was a little girl at the time. But even so I sensed her special force and her resiliency, her spirit--this woman who had fourteen children, including two sets of twins, and who managed, through acquiring land in Barbados, to send most of her children abroad; and who worked her land up until the day of her death. She was this stalwart black woman. I've always identified with her. In fact I've always felt that I was more her child than my mother's. And her heir as well, in the sense that I have the feeling I was perhaps put here on this earth to preserve and continue her essence. And so Celestine in *Daughters* is yet another incarnation of Da-duh. But then so is Great-Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong*, as is the old woman Leesy Walkes in *Chosen Place*, as is Mrs. Thompson, the hairdresser from down South, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*...

DD: So she can be an American?

PM: Oh, yes. I don't make any distinction between African-American and West Indian. All o' we is one as far as I'm concerned. And I, myself, am both. Anyway, I'm sure that Da-duh will make her appearance in the next novel down the pike. I am in many ways an unabashed ancestor worshipper. I need the sense of being connected to the women and men, real and imaginary, who make up my being. Connection and reconciliation are major themes in my work.

DD: You have spoken often as well of your mother, but you dedicate *Daughters* to your father, about whom you've made only occasional comments. One can't miss, of course, the females in your novels who wrestle with romantic, charismatic, somewhat mysterious father figures. Are you working through your relationship with your father?

PM: [Pause] Yes, the dedication suggests that. I've finally overcome, as much as it's possible for me to overcome, some really deep-seated feelings of anger and hurt caused by that relationship. The greatest grief of my childhood was that my father deserted us to become a member of Father Divine's quasi-religious cult, a sect that was popular back in the thirties and forties. My handsome, charismatic father, who was given to wearing silk underwear and spats, who played the trumpet-or tried to for years-and who, like my mother, was a natural-born poet, would say to us in the morning, "Rise and shine and give God the glory!" This father whom I adored became a devotee of someone who decreed there were no mothers and fathers, parents and children, rather that he, Father was father and mother to all. So that Samuel Burke, my father, forbade my sister and myself to call him Daddy. Finally, he out of our lives altogether to go and live in Father Divine's "kin in Harlem, abandoning us to a cycle of poverty and my mother's decline into bitterness, cancer, and an early death It's taken me a long time and much interior work to get over my anger at him. And also to overcome the fear that I had been contaminated with what I sensed and saw as his failure. Failure it seemed he almost actively out. For years I was afraid that no matter how hard I tried, I'd escape his bad luck and his failed efforts to be an artist. And then was the pain and outrage at having been rejected by the one you loved most That's, of course, how I interpreted it as a little girl and that outrage and sense of inevitable rejection were, I think, to undermine the important relationships with men later on in my life. I've had to really struggle to undo that damaging pattern It's a very paint subject for me to deal with.

But through *Daughters* and the story of Ursa, my main and her relationship with her father, the tensions and conflicts and her ability finally to cut away that emotional dependency, I've also achieved a final purging. I've been able at last to forgive, bless, and to release Samuel Burke from my life while retaining and honoring the love I still feel for him. So *Daughters* in many ways is perhaps my most personal novel in that regard. Although I hasten to add that the personal and the autobiographical have been transformed, disguised, reinvented.

DD: And of course a similar situation is treated in *Brown Girl*.

PM: In *Brown Girl* not as fully. The greater emphasis in that novel was the relationship between the mother and daughter.

DD: But I was thinking about the father who actually does join a comparable religious sect in that novel, provoking a similar response from his daughter.

PM: Very much so, very much so. From the very outset I guess I've been trying to get to the point where I could deal with it more fully. It's always been there, though, in the work.

DD: Let's turn again to the women in the novels, and to those in *Daughters* in particular. Even more so than in the earlier novels the women in *Daughters* are silent, it seems to me, or if they do talk they yell, but there's little real communication. Can you talk a little bit about the silence of these women?

PM: What you see as silence, or the refusal or inability of the key women in *Daughters* to express themselves verbally, is a technique I deliberately chose to employ. First of all, I felt that it was in keeping with the characters, their personalities. It also provided me with a chance to deal with the silence that so often characterized my own relationships. I used to find it exceedingly difficult to express what I truly felt with my partners. Perhaps the silence in *Daughters* comes out of that in part. I'm not sure. On the other hand, Merle in *Chosen Place*, who talked nonstop, and Silla Boyce, the mother in *Brown Girl*, who loved to boast that she had no cover for her mouth and proved it on every page of the novel, were idealized images for me, the kind of outspoken, assertive women I would've loved to have been. Also the talk was in keeping with the kind of personalities I created for them. Avey Johnson in *Praisesong* and Ursa and Estelle in *Daughters* are perhaps closer to me in what you view as their silence. And I know it's a kind of outmoded response these days. People are not only supposed to talk endlessly, but to divulge their most intimate feelings. I suspect, though, that silence is still true for a lot of women.

DD: Yes.

PM: I have my doubts as to how many of us are actually able to talk about our real feelings with the men in our lives. Many of us still sit out our grievances in silence until we explode and start to yell or take some form of action. Silent sometimes till the point when we finally pick up the gun and just blow him away.

DD: Deadly silence!

PM: I might be wrong and I hope I am. At any rate, let me emphasize that the silence of the women in *Daughters* does not preclude action. Although much of the talk in the novel takes place offstage, the women express their feelings in action. Estelle drives out to that airport in the dead of night in her anger over the PM's infidelity. And we learn in the scene with her friend Roy that she has really let the PM know what she feels about the situation any number of times before actually taking action. It is established also that Ursa has told her lover many times in the past that his job is ruining both him and their relationship, and that serves the background for the final blowup between them. As I see it, the book is filled with a good deal of talk--but also with large, enraged silences.

DD: It's interesting that some of these women who obviously are together so much, especially Estelle and Celestine, and who never are able to establish any line of communication and never understand each other, might really have been supportive to each other. But I suppose that's often the case.

PM: That's true. Yet what I wanted to establish through Celestine's monologues was that even though she resents Estelle, the American there is still much about Estelle she genuinely likes and admires. Estelle, after all, was the one who taught her how to read. Estelle insisted that she, Celestine, have her own bedroom with her own furniture. Celestine refers to all this even when she's in the midst of finding fault with Estelle. I wanted to suggest the complex feelings my characters hold for each other.

DD: It's also interesting that Ursa, the daughter, and Astral, the keep-miss, are brought together in the same kind of pairing, one transcends economic standing, and where they live, and whether the Americans or West Indians. There is always something that reminds us of how much the women share.

PM: Yes.

DD: With Ursa and Astral there is first of all the matter of the abortion. You begin the introductions to both of these women with an abortion and, in effect, the novel may be primarily about giving birth or failure to give birth.

PM: Let's start with the two abortions detailed in the story. Ursa's, which opens the novel, is largely symbolic. It's meant to suggest her attempt to cut away the subtle seduction and domination that has long characterized her relationship with her father. She doesn't succeed in that first which is why she continues to feel that "this thing, whatever it is," as she says, is still there. It's only at the end of the novel, when she brings about the PM's political defeat, that she's finally free of this incubus. That last day at the beach when she falls down on the rock pile and injures her hip, the pain cuts across her belly in waves. I wanted to suggest that labor pains finally free her from the emotional dependency of So that opening abortion is designed to work double-time, as Flannery O'Connor would say (that is, to have several meanings). With Astral Forde, it's another matter. Her abortion is the real thing. Yet it was personally therapeutic. Writing about it permitted me to deal for the first time with a similar trauma in my own life when I was a woman. A date rape, an unwanted pregnancy, a back-alley abortion, which was the only kind available in my day. In Astral Forde's case, Ursa becomes the child she aborted-- although, of course, she would never admit it. But it

was important for me to establish this in order to underscore the point that Ursa is the little girl of all of these daughters, all these women.

DD: What about the fact that Astral, like Ursa, has this feeling that there's something left in there?

PM: Yes, but what is left in there is, as she refers to it, a wire thing. "It's like the man left the wire thing up inside me." This sensation of the wire still inside her is, she believes, the thing that has made her sterile. She intimates as much in one of her soliloquies. She was maimed, she was made barren by that procedure: "Who says I can have any blasted children!"

DD: Children are very important in this novel.

PM: Yes. A good deal of space is given to children in the book. I use them to suggest the future. This is especially true of the boy Robeson and his little friend Dee Dee. They are, for me, the modern-day counterparts of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe--inseparable, supportive of each other, united in times of trouble. Dee Dee with those ever vigilant eyes of hers and her beaded hair in the Black Liberation colors of black, red, and green. Robeson, who stands up to the policeman and is "injured," as so many black men have been injured in one way or another in this society. There's Lowell, Ursa's lover, with his permanent frown of worry that is like the keloid of a wound that refuses to heal.

Robeson's mother in the novel, as well as Ursa's best friend, represents the consummate mother. Her goal is to raise a child who will be useful in the struggle, someone who can be depended upon to bring a bucket of water to the woods that are on fire--meaning our communities both here and in the West Indies. Viney tries to ensure Robeson's safety by surrounding him with an array of material things, only to be reminded when he is arrested that perhaps there's no real safety for a black child in America.

DD: Estelle is a major figure in this novel. Of course, there are many important women in this novel. But with the other women we generally learn about them in very direct ways through their conversations with good friends to whom they speak honestly and directly or through entering their minds. But with Estelle there's usually some distance. Perhaps the closest revelation of what we might see as coming directly from her is those letters, but of course, with letters we don't express everything, especially not to the people back home. And clearly the things that bother her most are never discussed in those letters, and the things that bother her most are told to us through Celestine or others, who are often unsympathetic toward her. Why do we learn about the traumatic ever in her life through a second voice?

PM: Well, that speaks to some very fundamental issues about craft: how to reveal character, how to make your people come alive on the page and matter to the reader. As a fiction writer, you have at your disposal a number of ways to accomplish this--dialogue, description, action, thoughts, behavior, an array of techniques. With Estelle I decided try some of the less conventional means, in part to get away from the fairly standard methods used in portraying the other women in, novel, and also to challenge myself. I would tell Estelle's story largely through letters and a secondary voice, that of Celestine. One reason: the decision had to do with language. It struck me that there

might too great a similarity in the voices of Ursa, her close friend Viney, and Estelle. A mainly urban, North American speech. What would be more interesting linguistically, I thought, would be to tell the Estelle part the narrative in the different and more colorful voice of Celestine. I wanted to balance the voices in the novel. It was something of a risk, I knew, but I decided to try it. And I really don't think that any less vivid or any less affecting as a character because of it. I may wrong, but it seems to me that she does reveal her feelings about problems she's wrestling with in her letters. Her miscarriages, her difficulties adjusting to life in Triunion, the depth of her love for the

PM: Later, she refers obliquely to her acceptance of his don't even understand me anymore," she says in one of the letters, things I've accepted living here." And so I've tried to present Estelle at something of an angle instead of head-on.

DD: Is she also a character who is closer to your heart and therefore haps protected a little bit, kept a little distant?

PM: That's an interesting question. She is a composite of many whom I've known, including myself, as well as people I've I don't know that I have revealed less about her by the method I've used.

DD: Why hasn t Estelle developed any close friendships with won as is the case with the other important women in the novel?

PM: She does have a friendship, although it is not as fully developpe the others. There is this strong relationship between Estelle and Roy, doctor-friend, as she calls him. So I do provide her with a key friendship, but it's a male, again trying to do something slightly different with Estelle.

DD: There are, in Daughters, very vivid pictures. The action is arrested and there is this image that remains: Ursa, the little girl, reaching up to touch the toe of Congo Jane's statue; the PM's mother, Miss Mack, hooking her cane around the neck of her helper in the shop; and Astral at the swimming pool holding the towel and the soursop juice for Ursa, reduced to a maid. What are the sources of such pictures?

PM: Again, as with my characters, images and scenes are sometimes drawn from life but transformed to suit my fictional purposes; usually, though, they're pure inventions. For example, Astral Forde, and the towel, and the soursop juice, came solely from my imagination. So, too, Ursa being raised on Estelle's shoulders to reach the statue in the first chapter. On the other hand, I used my Haitian mother-in-law for the woman with the cane. My mother-in-law was a shopkeeper who was known to hook her little helpers around the neck with her cane handle when they committed some infraction. And that image stayed with me. I knew I would use it in a story or a novel some day. And I really love doing that. I love working long and hard to make a scene come alive. I've been called a "picture writer" and I like to think that's true. I'm always trying to use language and imagery and description in such a way that the reader sees as I see in my mind's eye, with that same clarity, vividness, and depth of feeling. I work very hard at that.

DD: You weave many plots with many characters--what of little Robeson? Is he likely to show up in a future novel?

PM: It's uncanny that you should ask that, because in the novel that's slowly beginning to take shape in my head now there's a little boy who will figure as a central character.

DD: Are any of the situations similar to this one?

PM: Not really. Only the fact that there is this little boy. In fact the entire novel, as I'm thinking, might be told in his voice. He's not Robeson, though. All I know about him at this point is that he's the child of some jazz musicians who went to live in Paris, and when they die there, the boy is brought back to the States to be raised by his two rivalrous grandmothers. These two live across the street from each other in Brooklyn and have been at odds for years because of the marriage of their children. It will be a kind of Romeo and Juliet theme, with the old women--one from the South, the other from the Islands--suggesting the warring Montagues and Capulets, with the child, this little boy, caught in the middle of the fray. That's as far as I've gotten. But I am struck by the fact that you felt something more should be done with Robeson.

DD: You mentioned that the women in *Daughters* were there, in your head, before you even had a story for them. But were there any women who were not a part of your original scheme, who sort of came into it? Astral, for example, was she there from the beginning?

PM: Astral? Let's see. The women wandering around backstage in mind were very shadowy. Estelle was there. And Ursa, certainly, because I was interested, I knew, in creating a story about a young woman would represent the coming together of two cultures--African-American, West Indian--someone expressive of my own background. There was, of course, the ancestral figure, who was Celestine. She was there. And, i Astral Forde must have been present also, given the fact that the "i side" woman, the keep-miss, is such an institution in the West Indies. They have all kinds of interesting names for her.

DD: Keep-miss is most appropriate. And was Viney, Ursa's best friend in the novel, also a part of the original group?

PM: I'm not sure. Viney might have been a later addition. I needed to represent the world of the young professional African-American woman an making her way through the mine field of men, work, children, racism and sexism of the society, and so on. Also Viney serves as a foil and alter ego for Ursa--she is the sister/friend, as Ursa calls her.

DD: Speaking of bringing the Afro-American and West Indian cult together, Eddie Brathwaite, the West Indian poet and historian, has that you probably would not have written your second novel, *Place, Timeless People*, had you not been a West Indian, and not have written it had you not been an Afro-American of West parentage. Do you see yourself as an American writer, a Caribbean writer, or is it impossible to make that kind of classification?

PM: Well, I was once accused by, I think it was Harold Cruse, in ' *Crisis of the Negro*. Intellectual, of being neither fish nor fowl, of fallen between two stools as a writer because of my background. been at times loudly claimed by the African-American literary ity as well as the West Indian, and occasionally as loudly both. It used to hurt and exasperate me years ago--the disclaiming part of it--

and still does to some degree. But I simply go on being perceive my life and my work to be. And I like to think of myself my work--especially the work--as a kind of bridge that joins the great wings of the black diaspora in this part of the world. I really in that way. And agreeing in part with Edward Brathwaite, perhaps there is a certain advantage in being neither fish nor fowl; perhaps it gives me a unique angle from which to view the two communities: one hand, yet a certain objectivity and beneficial distancing on other. I don't know. What I do know is that there is this tendency to categorize the writers, to put us in pigeonholes. People want to be able to get a handle on you--and my reaction is to try not to take it on, but to go ahead with the work and to honor my imperatives as a writer. And my principal imperative is to give expression to the two cultures that created me, and which I really see as one culture. All o' we is one.

DD: Even before you moved to Richmond, Virginia, there seemed to be some fascination with the South in some important characters you created: Mrs. Thompson in *Brown Girl* and Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong*. In *Daughters*, Viney is from the South-- Petersburg, Virginia, in fact. How did Petersburg win out over Richmond?

PM: Well, for one thing, Petersburg has bigger and more spectacular Civil War battlefields. I'm thinking of the famous Crater. In creating a personal history for Viney, I decided to put one such battlefield across the road from her family's house in Petersburg. The house is also put a few doors down from their church, The Triumphant Baptist (and there is a Triumphant Baptist Church in Richmond--that's where I got the name). Viney's Triumphant Baptist Church also faces the battlefield. And I just let that configuration of battlefield, church, and her family's house make their statement about an entire history.

DD: A lot of writers from the Caribbean suggest that on one level they do seem to relate to the South. Some of them have said there are things about the South that remind them more of the Caribbean than the North does.

PM: Well, it's odd. I find myself living here in Richmond, yet most of the time I'm not really that conscious of being in the South as such. That is, until I hear someone speaking with a pronounced southern accent or a clerk in a store "yes and no ma'ams" me to death or I happen upon a Civil War reenactment, which is what happened to me the very first week I came to live in Richmond. I was walking downtown and suddenly I saw a group of men in gray Confederate uniforms coming toward me... along with some women dressed in Scarlett O'Hara hoop skirts and bonnets and so on. And for a moment, before I understood what was going on, I could have sworn I was in a kind of time warp. I felt like a character in an Octavia Butler novel who has been suddenly catapulted back to the antebellum South. And I was really all ready to take the plane out of Richmond. It also took me some time to adjust to all of the statues of Confederate heroes lining Monument Avenue, reminding me practically every other block that these men on their noble steeds were fighting to preserve my enslavement. So it's taken a while to adjust to some of those things. Generally, though, living in Richmond these seven years has been a positive experience. It's slowed me down some, and after having lived in New York City all my life, I needed to decelerate. It's also provided me with the opportunity--because I find life here less pressured--to work on my inner being, so to speak, and to unburden myself of a lot of negative programming. So I've become a sort of happier,

more relaxed, and younger person even as I become a Gray Panther.

And Richmond has also proven to be a good place for me to get the writing done. But I'm the kind of person who can pretty much live and work anywhere. Essentially I am someone who has always lived on, periphery. I'm basically a loner by choice, someone whose day is pretty much given over to her work. I mainly need a congenial setting, that's what, really, Richmond has provided me with.

DD: In one article called "The Negro Woman in Literature," written in 1966, you said that "the writer has to remain at all times true to] personal vision, even though it might not be in fashion this season. I think, considering that time, we pretty much know the kinds of you were referring to. But I'd like to know what you see as the "fashionable" thing now that some writers might feel pressured to treat. Are we still concerned with "in" things in writing?

PM: Well, I said that, let's see, about twenty-five years ago, and too sure I knew just what my personal vision was back then, or maybe I was just trying to sound profound. Seriously, I probably meant that I wanted to remain true to those themes and concerns, some of which I've mentioned earlier, that excite and challenge my imagination and abilities as a writer of fiction--to continue writing, for instance, about people in relation to their communities and the struggle that one wage to possess one's true-true name--the whole question of autonomy not only personal and individual autonomy, but autonomy of cultures and countries. As an example of the kinds of pressures I've had to I'm always being urged to write a novel that's set exclusively in the States. Some who read my work worry that using the West Indies as a setting, even if in part only, somehow goes against me. That it makes me less "folks," less African-American. Very interesting reaction. And these[ple really mean me well and even love me, some of them. But I'm afraid I really can't accommodate them because my way of seeing the world been so profoundly shaped by my dual experience, those two communities, West Indian and African-American. Those two great traditions--they nurtured me, they inspired me, they formed me. I am fascinated by the interaction of the two cultures, which is really, as I see it, one tradition, one culture. But I'm repeating myself.

DD: You are, of course, one of the most highly regarded novelists day. Your work has been praised worldwide by critics as well other writers, and you have already exerted a major influence on your peers and younger writers. What goals do you set for yourself now? Does it continue to be just a matter of dedicating yourself to each novel? Is there any fear that you won't live up to the expectations that come as a result of the acclaim you've received thus far?

PM: Well, the doubt, the fear are always there. They go with the territory.

DD: It doesn't get worse as a result of success?

PM: Not really, because all of the hoopla, all of the praise and blame pretty much fade away once I sit to the desk and begin wrestling with the words, the sentences, the scenes, the plot, the characters, creating a fictional reality. What the world is thinking of me and the work and so on really does not have an impact on the writing itself once I'm truly immersed in it. But, of course, you always hope to go one better with the latest work. I mean that's the American way to be, isn't it? You always want to top that previous performance. And yes, to some degree I do feel the

pressure, but not to the extent that I used to as a younger writer. Rather, I'm beginning to see each new work as another attempt on my part to communicate the world inside my head to the larger world around me, and my goals remain the same essentially: to create a body of work that will offer young black women, such as I was years and years ago, a more truthful image of themselves in literature. That's my ideal audience, although I invite and welcome everyone to read the work. I believe that literature that speaks to the truth of our lives is an empowering force. It gives us the sense of our right to "be" in the world, and once you have that sense of your right to be in the world, all positive things follow from that. The possibility of really beginning to salvage our communities will follow from that. As for myself, I simply write the book or the story. I try to get it as good as I can. I put it out there in that cutthroat public arena; I hope for the best... and go on to the next book. That's pretty much my life.

DD: I clearly recognize your concern about writing for young women and speaking rather directly to young black women, but a lot of your work obviously speaks to older black women, too.

PM: Yes, equally as important are black women of a certain age, my age. I tend to emphasize the young because of the fact that one of the things that I had to wrestle with growing up, as I came into consciousness and became a serious reader, was that I didn't see myself reflected anywhere. Certainly I didn't see myself reflected in the literature in any kind of truthful and complex way, and that was a very painful experience. There were no books back then that reflected my experience or reassured me that I had a right to be here, that there was much about my life that was of worth and value. That's why I stress the young black women, thinking back to that young woman I once was, searching for a sense of self.

DD: When did you discover black women writers?

PM: I discovered them, let's see, I was well into my teens, because although Zora Neale Hurston was being published during the years that I began seriously reading, I was never told about her, encouraged read her. Most of the books I read came out of the canon of European literature, and I do love the work and was very much taken with great sweeping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels: Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the work of Dickens, Thomas Hardy--I loved Thomas Hardy--and later, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann, all of that. Yet there was always, at a deeper level, a sense of lack. Something was missing--I couldn't quite define it. Couldn't really define it. I'm talking now about, oh around the age of thirteen, fourteen or so... until I came volume of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems and was made aware were black writers and was given the courage by that collection of Dunbar's poems to go up to the white librarian at the library in my hood and ask her to give me a list of books by and about black was then, slowly, that I began educating myself.

DD: Do you recall whether there were any women writers those you read early?

PM: I think that the one who had the greatest impact, and critical later in the way I went about shaping the character of *Brown Girl*, was Gwendolyn Brooks and her poetic novel *Because* what Gwen Brooks did in that book was to render her character from the inside out. We were privy to Maud's mind, to her thoughts. She was an interior being, someone with a consciousness, with thoughts; and I was very intrigued by that because so many of the black women that I came across

in the literature, especially those whites--say, for instance, Roxy in Pudd'nhead Wilson and Dilsey--were reduced to mere surface and stereotype; done no life apart from the whites they served. But here, for the first Maud Martha, was a complex rendering of a black woman--and exceedingly important for me.

DD: Yes, it seems to me, too, that the same situation obtained in Caribbean--that people grow up not knowing Caribbean literature they seek it out on their own--this situation is changing now. When you first introduced to Caribbean literature?

PM: Much later on. Just shortly before I went to the West Indies as an adult. That was in the mid-fifties. By then I had read Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and had begun my education in West Indian letters.

DD: I see. You mentioned once that Merle in *Chosen Place* was your favorite character

PM: Merle is special to me. There's that big mouth of hers first of all. Also she represents a kind of idealized image for me. Merle's the kind of woman I would have loved to have been, someone who states in no uncertain terms what she's thinking, what she's feeling. Her commitments are very clear. She takes charge. Yet, at the same time, she has this vulnerable quality. She's an exceedingly important character in my work in that she sums up in her person and in the personal history I provided her with-- what has happened to black people in this part of the world. She embodies an entire history. She is the child of the hemisphere.

DD: As in your other novels, there are in *Daughters* some memorable male figures, but here it seems that the women find their answers only when they are able to overcome the male, who is, to play on what becomes symbolic in the novel, blocking their view from the sun, and at that point, when the women begin to relate to each other--even to the keep-miss and the poorer sisters--they seem to blossom. Even with the historical figures, it's Congo Jane's love of something beautiful that stands out. Do you see this novel as being a more feminist statement about the need for the sisters to get together and work it out?

PM: I suspect that there's been a feminist--or to use Alice Walker's term--womanist perspective in my work from very early on. My very first story, written back in the early fifties, long before the feminist movement as such got underway in the seventies, was about a young mother and wife who insists on going back to college despite her husband's objections. He defeats her in the end and forces her to stop, but she briefly prevailed against him. Another early story of mine had to do with sexual harassment. The victim, a young black woman from the South, achieves a kind of strength--personal and political--as a result of resisting her white professor's attempts to seduce her. So there's always been that in my work.

From the time I started writing women have been central to my stories. There're a couple of reasons for this. One is that women were central to my world growing up. My mother and a group of her close friends were the principal people in my early life. They were women of great spirit, resourcefulness, and poetry--my mother most of all, before her life took its tragic turn. There's an African proverb that says, "It's woman's power on which a society ultimately depends." I sensed

this particular power in that group of women long ago. Moreover, my mother and her friends constituted, I remember, a kind of community apart from the men in their lives. I learned an important lesson from that--something about the importance of friendship and support among women. And this theme was taken up in *Daughters*, the pivotal friendship between Ursa and Viney, as well as Astral Forde and her friend Malvern.

The other reason that women are central to my work is that they were seldom the principal characters in the books I read growing up--and they were almost never black. So that without being terribly conscious of it, I determined to make women--especially black women--important characters in my stories when I started writing. To make up for the neglect, the disregard, the distortions, and untruths. I wanted them to be center stage.

They're certainly at the center of the story in *Daughters*. And yes, the women in the novel do begin to find answers to the personal and moral problems they confront in the book once they overcome--to use your word--the powerful hold the PM exercises over their lives in one way or another. "There's no resisting him," Ursa says of her father. For the women in *Daughters* the PM possesses the magnetic properties of a polestar, so that for much of the novel these women, including Ursa, are like a constellation around him. In fact, I use that image in the novel.

When Ursa, at the behest of her mother, engineers the PM's loss at the polls, she not only achieves personal liberation, she also destroys the configuration of polestar and constellation that involves the other women in the novel. Let me point out, though, that the action taken by Ursa at Estelle's orders is designed, not to defeat the PM, but rather to restore him to his original commitment and values. To repeat the African proverb: "It's woman's power on which a society ultimately depends."

And another reminder: whatever feminist note is struck in the novel is not meant to obscure what I hope will be seen as a major theme in *Daughters*: the need for black men and women to come together in wholeness and unity. It is this which informs the novel at its deepest level.

* I am grateful to Mrs. Sonya Burke for her assistance in transcribing this interview.

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By Daryl Cumber Dance