

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Paule Marshall's Fiction

Each of Paule Marshall's major works of fiction—*Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Daughters*, and *The Fisher King*—features originally displaced communities of the African diaspora. The protagonists in this sextet, all women excepting the last, travel to geographical and spiritual continents as they face down their complex histories of home and exile. Collectively, these novels and novellas recite a saga of forced migration, of diasporic experience. Marshall herself tellingly suggests the dynamics of these intricate tales in two statements, the first addressing the influence of voyages on her writings, the shorter affirming her own intersecting ethnicities:

I think it is absolutely necessary for black people to effect [a] spiritual return [to origins in Africa]. As the history of people of African descent in the United States and the diaspora is fragmented and interrupted, I consider it my task as a writer to initiate readers to the challenges this journey entails.¹

I am Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American. . . . I am embracing both these cultures and I hope that my work reflects what I see as a common bond.²

Bearing Marshall's statements in mind, I argue that these fictions constitute a long, discontinuous, imaginative saga of African diasporic communities, perhaps the first of its kind. They address a range of topics from colonizers and colonized people in Africa, Britain, the Caribbean, France, and the United States; tradition and the role of elders and ancestors; colonial dehumanization; black female agency; black male leadership; collective insurgency; and urgent quests for identity.

Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) explores the palpable frustrations that abound in the home of Caribbean migrants in a Brooklyn brownstone.³ A second-generation Barbadian daughter who grows up there, adolescent Selina Boyce slowly embraces a political and sexual awakening in her ambivalent struggle with traditional values. Her reactions to a host of both positive and adversarial mentors ground the narrative. In Carole Boyce Davies's phrase, Selina is traveling between identities as she ends up voluntarily migrating to the Caribbean diaspora, as her father tried to do.⁴ Among the participants in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are Silla Boyce, Selina's tough, first-generation, Barbadian mother; her devil-may-care yet sensitive father, Deighton Boyce; the brownstone denizens; easy-going Suggie Sweet, one of the recurring outcast figures who populate Marshall's novels; and Miss Thompson, the wise, battle-scarred ancestor-warrior, also a recurring figure, whose love prompts Selina's maturation; Father Peace, the black community evangelist who transforms Deighton Boyce's life; Beryl, Selina's close friend from childhood from whom she gradually drifts apart; and Rachel and Clyde, close friend and lover respectively. After a community tragedy, Selina Boyce recapitulates her father's return to the Caribbean, but unlike her father Selina survives.

Soul Clap Hands and Sings (1961) stages very old men searching for a loss that underpins their lives and a love to replace it that will comfort them. In the first novella in *Soul Clap Hands and Sings*, "Barbados" features Mr. Watford returning to his natal island from the U.S. diaspora, where he remains detached from the community despite formidable interventions by a young, unnamed, black servant woman. In an ultimate, too-late effort to connect—one human being to another—he is poignantly thwarted. In the second story, "Brooklyn," professor of French Max Berman, the only caucasian protagonist, unilaterally decides that a black female student in his class will empower him to reclaim his life, a somewhat ironically correct assumption. Miss Williams exposes

Berman to an eye-opening encounter that in turn exposes his threadbare existence in contrast to her own emotional tenacity. He returns home defeated, while she moves proudly forward. "British Guiana," the third fiction, dramatizes Gerald Motley immured in a colonial past that prevents him from embracing the stance of cultural icon/spokesman. Too late like Mr. Watford, he extends himself to Sidney with a selfless, anti-colonial gesture, yet that tiny altruistic moment has not gone unnoticed by Sidney, for whom Gerald appears to have an emotional attachment. In the last novella entitled "Brazil," protagonist and popular entertainer Caliban is bent on recapturing Hector Guittirez, his born name, and abandoning his synonymous and interchangeable roles as the butt of tourist jokes and scapegoat for colonial voyeurism. Comprehending regretfully that an ersatz identity has been thrust upon him by a demeaning colonial culture, Caliban decides to plunge into his former community life. Echoing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, he recognizes the erasure of his identity, and, as the "son" of mother Sycorax who has the power to reconstruct events, he reclaims himself. More perceptive and open than Berman, Watford, and Motley—perhaps the product of more fluid circumstances—Caliban feels so connected to others that he feels the possibility of an unknown freedom within himself. Unlike the other old men, he cherishes a hope that he will live a forward-looking life from now on.

In its dramatic metaphorical opening, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), Marshall's second novel stages another significant journey from the mythical Bourne Island in the Caribbean, to Africa. At the start, Merle Kimbona rages when her car gets stuck in the mud of the symbolically named Westminster Low Road. Now she will be late in meeting U.S. (imperial) visitors at the airport. Her equally symbolic, religion-tinged jewelry, the anti-colonial history of the Caribbean that she teaches her students, and the eclectic mix of furniture, books, and art in her bedroom collectively enhance the profile of a magnificent rebel. "Striving to be both European and black," Merle is attuned to her doubled location in Black Atlantic culture.⁵

Soon Merle finds herself interacting with the visitors: Saul, the well-meaning Jewish consultant, and his wife Harriet, an ultimately treacherous U.S. "philanthropist." In addition, she spars equably with a conflicted Caribbean elite, while she fights on behalf of poverty-stricken yet ultimately independent community members. In the

end, she declines any further complicity in colonial mystification and heads for her diasporic origins in Africa to seek out her daughter and estranged husband.

Published fourteen years later, *Praisesong for the Widow* similarly opens on an ocean—specifically on a cruise ship from which Avey Johnson means to disembark, without alerting her two cruise companions. Emboldened by still blurred but emotionally overwhelming memories of a recent experience, Avey navigates a winding course in search of her history, ultimately rejecting “home” in the urban Northern White Plains. With historical memory and ancestor Lebert Joseph assisting her, she throws herself joyfully into a pan-African celebration on Carriacou in the Grenadines. Gentle elder Joseph intuits how to introduce Avey Johnson to cultural practices that survived the Middle Passage.⁶ A numbed Avatara, formerly Avey, finally feels rooted. She knows who she is and where she came from and why. Following that epiphany, Avatara Johnson leaves White Plains behind for good—along with white values—and returns to her father’s Gullah/Barbadian roots in the South Carolinas where she spent summers as a child living with her extraordinary great-aunt Cuney. Like Selina Boyce and Merle Kimbona, Avatara Johnson starts piecing her past, present, and future together, venturing to the Caribbean home of her descendants and site of slaves’ arrival from Africa.

Daughters (1991) continues the intercontinental journey that features Africa as a point of reference and of origin. Protagonist Ursa Mackenzie’s mother hails from a U.S. civil rights family, and her Caribbean father leads the opposition on Triunion Island, his political principles embattled by colonial blandishments. Following in the footsteps of Selina Boyce, Merle Kimbona, and Avey Johnson, Ursa integrates her complex identities by undertaking a spiritual and physical journey in contrasting diasporic communities, the United States and the Caribbean. Ursa’s father exemplifies the strangling force of U.S. interference in the Caribbean, while her friends in the States—Viney Daniels, Lowell Carruthers, and May Ryland—successfully endure daily battles with institutionalized corruption over issues of race and class. Ursa has suffered twin abortions, a recent physical one and a professional one years earlier when her doctoral supervisor denied her the right to pursue her heritage via a PhD thesis on slave insurgency. A resistant Ursa, about to start a new job, caves in to her mother’s pressing request that she return to Triunion for her father, Primus Mackenzie’s election.

With two fathers (her academic supervisor and Primus) subsuming her personal and collective identity, Ursa retaliates. Resembling Selina, Ursa claims female mentors, even more widely dispersed. During her childhood, moreover, her radical mother always pointed the daughter in a sound, astronomical direction by acclaiming two ancestor-slaves, Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, as Ursa's lodestar. In the end, Ursa gains a renewed cultural awareness, rooted in her history as a black woman of African descent. A long, soothing bath at the narrative's end, suffused with her grandmother's herbs, will equip Ursa for a worthy future as one of the Caribbean's new archivists, carefully chronicling slave insurgency on Triunion for publication and hence for the education of her community.

In her sixth and most recent novel, *The Fisher King*, Paule Marshall sketches a black political agenda for African Americans that respects and reveres the past, plays out the importance of the present, and focuses on the future. Respect for all generations as well as individuals' coping devices, their community successes, and their candor when it's needed—tomorrow's activists start receiving their birthright of care and attention.

Additionally, *The Fisher King* shifts the line of vision in earlier novels by presenting a young male protagonist, Sonny Carmichael Payne, raised in Paris by Hetty, an orphan from the States. The pair come to Brooklyn to attend a commemoration concert for his deceased grandfather, Sonny Rhett Payne, a famous, internationally distinguished jazz pianist. Young Sonny's uncle Edgar is transforming the diasporic community by offering its members full employment in his construction company, and by bringing Sonny home from Paris. Hence assimilation, exile, repatriation, and dislocation make their presence felt.

Having (temporarily) completed this fictional saga over the course of four decades from the 1950s to the millennium, what has Paule Marshall fictionally recorded for global readers? In a nutshell, as a second-generation Barbadian novelist, she has chronicled a post-slavery saga, an unprecedented permanent archive of a four-hundred-year history of distinct strands of the African diaspora.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Paule Marshall's cultural tour de force in African American/African Caribbean fiction derives from her personal experiences as a child of Barbadian immigrants. Marshall talks about that life in "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" (1983), in which she pays tribute to a group of housewives—"my

mother included”—who spent their days “scrubbing floors.” Part of Marcus Garvey’s nurses’ contingent, this group of strong mothers marched up Seventh Avenue to Harlem during Garvey Day parades, discussing war and their adopted home of the United States—“this man country”—as well as the people back home in Barbados or Bimshore: “I was that little girl,” says Marshall, “sitting in the corner of the kitchen, in the company of poets. I was there, seen but not heard, while these marvelous poets carried on. And from way back I always wanted to see if I might not be able to have some of the same power they had with words—their wonderful oral art. I wondered if I could capture some of that same power on paper.”⁷

Like the kitchen poets, Marshall weaves old and new narratives with stories about formidable ancestors and adds to the mix three significant factors that complete or synthesize these earlier scenarios: first the European setting, particularly Paris; second, a poignant view of the evolution of jazz and its relationship to race relations; and third, a study, twenty years later, of the same Brooklyn community that saturated her first and still best-selling novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; and last, the introduction of a male protagonist whose presence brilliantly interrogates the question of gender.

With the appearance of a second narrative set in Brooklyn two decades later, which locates an expatriate New Yorker jazz musician in Paris after World War Two and returns his great-grandson to Brooklyn from Paris—Marshall produces a canvas of global dimensions across race, class, and gender lines, the relationships both interweaving and harmonizing.

This protagonist’s heritage is a mix of Caribbean, African, and African American: the great-grandparents of young Sonny (Sunny) Carmichael Payne (Pain) hail from the Caribbean and Georgia, a French émigré grandfather and grandmother, a French mother and an Algerian father. Not only that, but Hattie who raises Sonny till he is six years old is herself a city orphan, symbolizing the devastation of the triangular trade, the Middle Passage, that “Peculiar Institution” of slavery, and physical though not necessarily emotional and psychological emancipation. Thus *The Fisher King* brings Paule Marshall’s saga to a splendid, possibly temporary happy ending, leaving in its wake contradictions that contain within themselves the possibility of resolution.