

# 'SOME OF ALL OF US IN YOU': INTRA-RACIAL RELATIONS, PAN-AFRICANISM AND DIASPORA IN PAULE MARSHALL'S *THE FISHER KING*

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## 1. Introduction

In her latest novel to date,<sup>1</sup> Marshall offers the story of two black American families, the Paynes and the McCullums —of Caribbean and American Southern immigrant background respectively— over four generations. At the heart of central Brooklyn, Macon Street has witnessed the feud between the two families, whose beloved children Everett Payne, a talented jazz pianist, and Cherisse McCullum eloped to Paris in 1949, fleeing racism and in search of a less stifling cultural climate. Yet the action is set in the spring of 1984, as Edgar Payne, a successful Brooklyn businessman, organizes a memorial concert for his brother Everett, now dead, who had risen to stardom in the Parisian jazz scene. Edgar Payne lures Hattie Carmichael, Everett Payne and Cherisse McCullum's best friend who had joined them in Paris, back to the States for the event. Hattie brings little Sonny, Everett and Cherisse's great-grandson whom she had brought up in Paris, along with her. In keeping with the contrapuntal style characteristic of Marshall's fiction, the narrative shuttles between the present and the past, as Hattie and other characters remember Everett's unconventional life in Paris, and also the long-standing family feud between the Paynes and the McCullums, which is kept raging by the elderly heads of the households, Ulene Payne and Florence McCullum. This family conflict partly stems from and is set against the frictions

that developed between the different black ethnic groups —'native' blacks, black Southerners, Afro-Caribbeans— competing for space and resources in Brooklyn's ghettos in 1930s and 1940s.

Although it is the rise and fall of jazz in the African-American and black expatriate French scenes that shapes *The Fisher King* (2000), what really draws the reader's attention in the novel is Marshall's revisiting of her old neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Central Brooklyn, the setting of her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Accordingly, the brownstone, an icon of success in American society for Marshall's immigrants, becomes a central figure again. Significantly, the brownstones are described in the early pages of the novel with the same warfare imagery Marshall had used in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, as "brown uniform houses [...] an army goosestepping toward an enemy that was a mirror image of itself across the street" (16). After recreating an ambience her readers are familiar with, Marshall plunges into a more thorough analysis of the Brooklyn multi-ethnic black community she had introduced us to in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

In fact, *The Fisher King* marks a departure from the first novel in that the author moves the focus away from the parochial Barbadian immigrant community in Brooklyn onto African-American/Afro-Caribbean relations. What makes *The Fisher King* an excellent companion to *Brown Girl Brownstones* is the fact that it not merely hints at the Afro-Caribbean/Black American conflict, but brings it to the forefront. Critics have noticed Marshall's tendency, in the course of her writing career, towards widening the ethnic scope of her black characters. In the words of Toby Rose:

Marshall's fiction has evolved in time and space from first-generation immigrants who are closeted in a parochial neighborhood of Brooklyn and trying to mediate between cultural identities and imperatives, to second and third-generation transcultural representatives of the African diaspora who are now secure in their racial skins (1999: 120).

Indeed, in *The Fisher King* —which, published in 2000, is beyond the chronological scope of Toby Rose's 1999 essay— Marshall expands her ever-widening referential circle to include the third and fourth generation offspring of African-American/Afro-Caribbean unions and even the multifarious black communities rooted in European cities such as Paris. Her focus is therefore not on the tribalism of first generation Caribbean immigrants and the identity conundrum of the hyphenated second generation, but rather on the problems posed by the interaction between blacks from different ethnic groups. In effect, in her latest novel Marshall forcefully tackles the issue of intra-racial conflict, which is somehow overlooked by critics who, like Rose, are bent on praising her diaspora

sensibility and her relentless call for black solidarity across ethnic lines. In this paper I argue that *The Fisher King* completes Marshall's trajectory of widening and problematising the notion of the monolithic black subject and its community.<sup>2</sup>

Section One of this paper provides the reader with the necessary historical background to grasp Marshall's handling of black intra-racial conflict in New York ghettos, and goes on to tackle her treatment of the issue in *The Fisher King*, which is read against *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The arena where conflict is played out is the focus of Section Two, where I connect Marshall's in-depth portrait of the Bedford-Stuyvesant setting with her complex analysis of Brooklyn's black community. In Section Three I locate Marshall's discussion of black intra-racial relations and politics within the ongoing debate over Pan-Africanism and ethnic absolutisms, elaborating on the author's increasing black diaspora sensibility and her recourse to, for the first time in her work, one of the diaspora's European branches in *The Fisher King*.

## **2. Intra-racial relations in New York's black ghetto neighbourhoods**

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At this juncture, some historical background on black intra-racial interactions becomes necessary. The frictions between African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans have to be traced back to the development of a multi-ethnic black community in the New York ghettos of the early twentieth century. The post-war economic boom attracted the migration of Afro-Caribbeans to New York in the 1920s, which coincided with the so-called *Great Migration* of Southern blacks to the Northern metropolis. Therefore, Caribbeans migrating to the US in the early decades of the twentieth century joined the country's large black population, which was at this time replenishing itself with new arrivals from the American South. Speaking of Harlem's evolving black community, Watkins-Owens points out that in addition to many migrants from the southeastern seaboard states, residents living in the area came from islands such as Jamaica, Barbados, Monserrat, Antigua, Bermuda, the Bahamas, Martinique, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other countries in South America and West Africa (1996: 2). In fact, eighty-two per cent of the black immigrants came from the English-speaking Caribbean (4). This migration, Watkins-Owens rightly points out, gave rise to "a new historical development in American urban life, an African intra-racial ethnic community" (29). The relationship that developed between native and immigrant blacks was nonetheless marred by ambivalence.

On the one hand, Caribbean immigrants joined in and benefited from the African-American struggle to achieve civil rights. In fact, educated Caribbeans played a prominent role in the political activity of the wider black community, being attracted to the black elite circles in Harlem. Marcus Garvey formed the *Universal Negro Improvement Association*, and W.E.B. Du Bois was a prominent Civil Rights leader. Caribbean immigrant writers such as Eric Walrond or Claude McKay made unique contributions to the literary *Harlem Renaissance* in poetry and fiction. However, Caribbeans were also seen as outsiders and competitors by the native black population. Afro-Caribbeans are known for their professional and business accomplishments in the US; thus the popularity of the label “Jewmaicans”, applied to Afro-Caribbeans in the US (Foner 1979, Cohen 1997). African-Americans, in turn, stereotyped Caribbeans as “stingy”, “craftier than the Jew”, “British”, or “clannish” (Hathaway 1999: 21). Caribbean immigrants soon realized that black Americans were a low-status group in a white society with which they were inevitably associated on racial grounds. They had received a British education and came from societies where, in spite of the colonial racial bias, blacks were a majority. Thus, they saw black Americans as lacking the racial pride and militancy they possessed; in the words of a Jamaican journalist and writer of the period who regarded Caribbean immigrants as a “gift from the tropics”, “they [Caribbeans] do not suffer from the local anesthesia of custom and pride which makes otherwise intolerable situations bearable for the home-staying majorities” (Domingo 1927: 347-8). The growing hostility between Afro-Caribbean immigrants and native blacks led a well-known African-American magazine, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, to publish a “Special Caribbean Issue” in 1926. The contributors to this issue intended to familiarize the magazine’s African-American readers with the newcomers, and thus improve relations between the two groups. In the context of black America, Caribbean immigrants were subject to the cross-pressures of their allegiance to their Caribbean peers and to the larger black community. Hence, competition over the scarce resources of a segregated community on the one hand and cooperation on political and social levels on the other characterize the relationship that developed between the African-American and the Caribbean communities in New York ghettos.

In a 1985 article published in the *New York Times Magazine*, Marshall shows her preoccupation with racial conflict in the black community, “Mother Africa’s children” (67), of her old Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood. She summarizes their biases as follows:

The West Indians criticized their American counterparts for not being more ambitious and for being too easily intimidated by white people. The African-Americans retaliated by calling the Islanders ‘monkey chasers’ and ridiculing them for

the too-bright 'West Indian colors' they wore on dress-up occasions. This was the kind of talk I heard as a girl, and I found it painful and confusing, for although I was West Indian by parentage, I was also part of the larger Afro-American culture (78).

Given its narrow focus on the Barbadian community, the issue of intra-racial conflict is secondary to *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. There are, however, some instances where Marshall does take up the issue, as in her clear assault on the *Barbadian Home Owner's Association* for its refusal to accept American blacks. Despite the Association's banner showing two black hands in a firm clasp against a yellow background, at one of their meetings, the audience disapproves of Claremont Sealey's suggestion that they should change the word 'Barbadian' for 'Negro' in the Association's logo and open their doors to "any colored person that qualify" (222). The community perceives Sealy's suggestion as subversive, and brands him as a "commonist" (223). Inter-marriage is also discouraged, as seen in Agatha Steed's decision to involve her daughter in a loveless marriage rather than allow her to marry "some boy from down South" (73). The Afro-Caribbean perception of black Americans as lazy and complacent is revealed through Barbadian Seifert Yearwood's complaint that he loses his African-American clients to the clubs on Saturday nights: "I tell you, this people from down South does work for the Jew all week and give the money right back to he on Sat'day night like it does burn their hand to keep it" (38). Thus, though Marshall brings the Barbadian community and their cultural distinctiveness to the forefront in her first novel, she does not overlook the tribalism of her islanders.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, therefore, we already perceive Marshall's penchant for ethnic harmony and cooperation, as well as her deployment of certain characters as agents of reconciliation between warring ethnic groups, although this is not the main point on her agenda. Miss Thomson, the only named African-American character in the novel, is a hardworking immigrant from the South who owns the beauty shop in Fulton Street, at the heart of Bed-Stuy, where she caters for the beauty needs of both black American and Afro-Caribbean women. Her conciliatory role is revealed in her exchanges with Selina, the protagonist, in her beauty shop. While Selina criticizes her mother and the Barbadian community's "dog eat dog" philosophy, Miss Thompson, who knows what it is like to be black and immigrant in white America, tries to justify the Barbadians' behaviour: "Honey, I know. West Indian peoples are sure peculiar, but you got to hand it to them, they knows how to get ahead [...] maybe some day you'll understand your moma and then you'll see why she does some of these things" (215). In her first novel, then, we already get the first intimations of Marshall's rejection of tribal solidarity for the good of the overall black community.

Let us turn now to a discussion of *The Fisher King* which, as I pointed out in the introductory section, testifies to Paule Marshall's increasing concern with the complex relations between different black communities, and manifests her penchant for fostering collaboration across ethnic lines.

Whereas intra-racial conflict is a subsidiary theme in Marshall's first novel, it becomes central to *The Fisher King*, featuring prominently in the very first chapter of the novel where the long-standing feud between the Paynes and the McCullums is foregrounded. These two families of black immigrants are paradigmatic of the two ethnic groups who added to the native black population of New York at the turn of the century and after World War I, Afro-Caribbeans and black Southerners respectively. Edgar Payne's decision to celebrate a memorial concert for his deceased brother Everett stirs the age-old feud between the "the two warring houses on Macon Street" (2000: 188), the McCullums and the Paynes, caused by their competition for success as minorities in American society as well as their perceived cultural differences despite their racial kinship, and fuelled by the marriage and elopement of their artistic children Everett Payne and Cherisse McCullum, "their homegrown Romeo and Juliet" (188), to Paris. The surviving strategists of the "[black] American-West Indian war" (51) still raging in 1984 on Macon Street are the aging heads of the Payne and McCullum households, Ulene Payne and Florence McCullum who, after more than thirty years, still blame each other for the loss of the children who should have redeemed their toils in America, but fled together to Europe instead.

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Florence resorts to the all-too familiar stereotypes about Caribbeans as islanders, "monkey chasers" (38), and "money-hungry" people "always wheeling and dealing" (40), "her [Ulene] and all those other old West Indians! Came flooding in here years ago and ruined the block" (41). Here Florence is alluding to the Caribbean immigrant's propensity for renting out the rooms of their brownstones in order to pay the mortgages on them. Her statement epitomizes the native blacks' reluctance to accept the foreign blacks who joined the city's black ghettos. Ulene, proud of her Caribbean traits, as her assertive use of the Caribbean dialect reveals, perceives Florence as an "American woman" (172). Indeed, Florence appears to be more colour-prejudiced than Ulene. When Florence sees her daughter's grandchild "the result of prescribed African-American/Afro-Caribbean intermarriage?" for the first time, she examines his face, concluding:

He's got the McCullum eyes! There's no getting around the fact those old W.I.s [West Indians] across the street put their mark on him, poor baby, but he's got the McCullum eyes, and that's what counts! [...] At one point she wiped his cheek with the tip of her finger, as if expecting the color there to come off like soot [...] Who's the daddy? ... African? (36).

Florence is uneasy about little Sonny's dark complexion and the Afro-Caribbean blood in him. Proud of her light complexion —“a tawny yellow-brown” (36)—, Florence personifies and identifies herself with the big magnolia tree outside her house that her father had brought from Georgia, Miss Grandiflora, who, “like all southern ladies [...] never tires of attention” (119). Florence's pride makes her silence the views that black Northerners hold about black Southern immigrants and their descendants —like herself. In turn, Viney, a character in Marshall's previous novel, *Daughters*, gives us a good insight into this prejudice against Southern blacks:

I'm kind of a foreigner myself. And I know the hard time they sometimes give us in this place. Petersburg, Virginia, that's where I am from. You see, I'd forget sometimes and come out with a y'all in class, and everybody would look at me like I just crawled out of a bale of cotton and still had lint in all my nappy hair [...] I used to feel like more of a foreigner than the real ones on campus (1992: 65).

Through Florence McCullum, Marshall stirs the debate over the troubled status of the Black Southerner in Northern black ghettos in her 2000 novel.

The rather unflattering views that Ulene and Florence continue to hold of each other's communities contradict Marshall's remarks concerning this issue in her 1985 article —which, curiously enough, is close to the year the novel is set:

There has been a lessening of the tensions and conflicts between West Indians and black Americans in recent years [...] the heightened political awareness and militancy of the last two decades has led [...] to a greater emphasis on racial rather than ethnic identity, on being black rather than West Indian. This, in turn, has led to a desire to have West Indian economic success seen not as a source of rivalry but as an achievement for blacks in general (1985: 82).

As I suggested earlier, the pervasiveness of the stereotypes about Afro-Caribbeans and African-Americans well into the 1980s is also revealed in *Daughters*, which also has a mid-1980s setting. After spending about two decades in New York, Ursa complains that she is thought “pushy, arrogant, different [...] monkey chaser” (1992: 210) as soon as her faint Caribbean accent is detected; her friend Viney, herself a Southern black, resorts to Ursa's alleged Britishness to account for her arrogance: “Massa really did a good job on you folks down there” (86). Yet there is a hint in Marshall's new novel that prejudice is not impervious to dilution over the generations.

Thus, even if it is true that in *The Fisher King* Marshall foregrounds the ongoing conflicts breaching the black community, at the same time she preaches the need for reconciliation. There is a suggestion in the novel that the long-standing feud between the McCullums and the Paynes is confined to the first generation

represented by old quirky Ulene and Florence, and is losing force in the new generations, represented by Edgar Payne and little Sonny.

Though portrayed as opposites, Ulene and Florence are equally dysfunctional and grotesque old women. One could picture Ulene Payne as an aged and senile Silla Boyce—the head of the Caribbean household in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*—whose zest for owning a brownstone and bringing up their children to be successful members of American society has taken a heavy toll on her, causing her to lose her beloved child Everett and to end up alone in a derelict house screaming at the now invisible roomers she once had —“You think I own Con Edison? Damn roomers! You’s more trouble than profit!” (2000: 20). The brownstone’s state of neglect parallels Ulene’s own self-neglect and her frail sanity, her mind shuttling unpredictably from the present to a past peopled by memories of her arrival as an immigrant to Ellis Island in the 1920s, the hardships experienced as a domestic working for the Jews of Flatbush, and her rejection of her musical son Everett, too artistic to be accepted in an upwardly mobile community; her reproachful words “[He] Had the brass-face to come round me playing the Sodom and Gomorrah music!” (15) resonate throughout the novel. Ulene’s uncombed hair and food-stained clothes clash with Florence’s overdressed, “doll-like” (33) countenance, in accordance with the inlaid marble floors and oak wainscoted walls of her house. So proud is Florence of her Southern roots and the achievements of her father—a black Georgian landowner in Jim Crow times, that she appears to recreate an obsolete Southern splendour in her Brooklyn house, which otherwise conceals her own struggle as the daughter of a Southern black immigrant in the North. Both women remain unreconciled with each other and with the course events have taken, keeping the West-Indian/Black American war raging.

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Edgar, Ulene’s son, becomes Marshall’s mouthpiece when he claims that “people in our [their] situation cannot afford that kind of divisive nonsense” (51). In fact, standing as a counterpoint to the grudge Ulene and Florence harbour against each other, is Marshall’s claim that these women share more than they would like to admit. Separately, they both reminisce about their waiting at “Franklin Avenue El” at “Albemarle Road” to be hired by a Jewish woman for a day’s domestic work (101, 120). Furthermore, there is a suggestion that Ulene and Florence’s great-grandson Sonny will be instrumental in the reconciliation of the two families, although such resolution is beyond the scope of the novel. His uncle Edgar claims that “he’s the one hopeful thing that’s come out of the thirty-year war and disunity on this block” (219). Raised in Paris, Sonny’s lack of prejudice—as evinced in his innocent question “What is a W. I. [West Indian]?” (43)—finds an echo in the adults surrounding him, underlining its arbitrariness and futility.



“You got some of all of us in you, dontcha? What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you? Better be somethin’ good” (36). Surprisingly, the disappointment experienced by Florence at her great-grandson’s phenotype, as we mentioned above, is tempered by her realization of the richness that all the strands that went into his making have bestowed on him. Young Sonny, whose mother Jojo was the daughter of Caribbean-American Everett and African-American Cherrise, and whose father was an African “*sanspapiers*” (79) — an illegal immigrant sent back home by French authorities— brings together the different branches of the African diaspora: Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe. His youth, the unawareness of American race politics thanks to his French upbringing, and the fact that both Ulene and Florence lay claim on him since it is through him that they may reach out to the children they have lost, make Sonny instrumental in the reconciliation between the McCullums and the Paynes.

### 3. Bedford-Stuyvesant

In accordance with her deeper analysis of New York’s layered black community, Marshall pays special attention to the Brooklyn setting in her new novel. Although Brooklyn’s neighbourhoods feature prominently among Marshall’s American settings, in her latest novel she dwells on the Northern neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant — colloquially known as Bed-Stuy, home to the Afro-Caribbean/African-American community she first depicted in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, and New York City’s largest black neighbourhood by the 1990’s. In *The Fisher King* Marshall chooses to ascribe more weight to the history of Bedford-Stuyvesant, furnishing the reader with a more in-depth portrait of the origins and development of her native neighbourhood. Founded by Dutch settlers, hence its name,<sup>3</sup> Bedford-Stuyvesant had been one of the most elegant neighbourhoods in the city, with its emblematic Romanesque Revival brownstones. The opening of the Brooklyn Bridge and later the construction of the A train brought a massive influx of blacks from Harlem into the area, causing the white population to leave gradually in the early decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, Bedford-Stuyvesant’s black community is nowadays the biggest in New York City, larger than that of Harlem.

Ulene’s remarks on the different immigrant groups taking over the neighbourhood highlight the way it was shaped:

the Jew [...] taking over Flatbush and the Gentile running from them out to Long Island. And all of them running from us [West Indian and black American alike]. A country where everybody always running from the next body feeling they’s better [...] one of these days they gon all run out of where-to-run (101).

Ulene's words are accurate in describing the way the neighbourhood was configured. The Jews, who had previously replaced the American white descendants of the first European settlers ("the Gentile"), were the last ones to leave Bedford-Stuyvesant for Flatbush, another neighbourhood in Central Brooklyn, as blacks moved in. Nevertheless, Ulene's remarks may also be taken as an indictment of racial politics in America, where, as Paul Gilroy would put it, different racial groups function as "national encampments", "heavily defended islands of particularity and their equally well fortified neighbours" (2001: 103) split by a gulf across which the possibility of communication is closed down.

Through Edgar Payne's business "The Three R's Group of Central Brooklyn: Reclamation. Restoration. Rebirth" and Florence McCullum's involvement in the "Landmark Conservancy Tours" venture, Marshall acquaints readers with the history and present reality of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood. Marshall connects these institutions, albeit implicitly, with the actual *Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation* and the *Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant* respectively.<sup>4</sup> Edgar displays proudly in his office a picture of himself shaking hands with Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Back in the 1960s, Edgar became involved in Kennedy's nationwide plan for rebuilding America's inner cities by rehabilitating the housing and developing community resources, pioneered by the *Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation*. His modern "Three R's Group", however, is a flourishing real state corporation, far removed from the philanthropist spirit of Kennedy's community development policies. Despite his claim of "saving" black properties and preserving an emblematic black neighbourhood (51), Edgar perceives himself as a "Dutch burgher whose only talent is buying and selling" (90). Furthermore, Edgar is portrayed as a de-ghettoized assimilated middle-class black. Paradoxically, following mainstream trends, Edgar has preferred Long Island over central Brooklyn, where he lives somehow encamped in a magnificent house surrounded by tall trees which, Hattie perceptively observes, allow him to forget "what color his neighbors are" (149), and serves the same purpose for his neighbours.

Florence's house on Macon Street, in turn, is emblematic of the African-American experience at the turn of the nineteenth century. Her father, Gayton McCullum, migrated North from Georgia around 1889 succumbing to white pressure on black landowners during Jim Crow times. In the course of time, the McCullums became "the first Coloreds to own a house on Macon Street" (122), planting a magnolia tree in their Brooklyn front garden as a memento of their Georgian roots. Florence struggled for her family history to be acknowledged and, consequently, for the house her father had left her to be designated a historical landmark by the "Landmark Conservancy". This organization is presumably

Marshall's fictional counterpart of the *Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant*, whose mission is to preserve the buildings and disseminate information about Weeksville, a historical nineteenth century settlement of free African-Americans located at what is today Bedford-Stuyvesant. Marshall uses Florence to embody this piece of African-American history, but, in keeping with the author's disdain for black elites, Florence is made to appear a quirky and pretentious old woman.

Despite her "vivid recreation of contemporary Brooklyn" in *The Fisher King*, as a reviewer has noted (Lynch 2001: par. 9), it should be pointed out that Marshall is silent on the seamier side of her chosen setting. In fact, according to a recent report published online by the *Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development* (PICCED), Bedford-Stuyvesant suffers all the evils characteristic of American inner city areas —poverty, teen pregnancy, infant mortality, substance abuse, high crime and aids rates, and the like,<sup>5</sup> regardless of its status as a historical landmark within New York. In contrast, inner city problems feature prominently in *Daughters* probably Marshall's most overtly political novel, whose militant protagonist is heavily engaged in a community development project jeopardized by the corruption of the local authorities. Marshall's slightly romanticized portrait of Bedford-Stuyvesant is due to the fact that it is ethnic relations and their history, rather than politics, that concern Marshall in her latest novel.

#### **4. Paule Marshall and Pan-Africanism**

The centrality of the relations between different black ethnic communities in her latest novel is symptomatic of Marshall's increasing concern with the diaspora formed by people of African descent, as I pointed out in the Introduction. In fact, the statement by Florence I quoted at the end of Section One —"You got some of all of us in you, dontcha? What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you? Better be somethin' good"— is given prominence as the novel's epigraph. Marshall believes that the whole thrust of her work is to touch upon the commonalities between the African-American and the Afro-Caribbean experiences, rather than to underline what is distinctive about each of these ethnic groups. Furthermore, she sees them as one single cultural expression:

I see similarities—they are all the same culture with some variations on the theme. That is the statement I am trying to make in my work. I have no patience with West Indian writers who feel their situation is unique and apart from the Black American experience. Similarly, I have no patience with Black American writers who feel that the Caribbean

is exotic and curious and different. To me, it's all part of the same thing. There may be differences of expression but at the base, it's the same cultural expression [...] This is what my work is about —to bring about a synthesis of the two cultures and in addition, to connect them up with the African experience (Ogundipe 1989: 34).

Hence her tendency to portray characters who, given their mobility or their cultural hybridity, bridge different black cultures.

Thus, we may relate Sonny in *The Fisher King* to the protagonist of *Daughters* Ursa Mackenzie, the daughter of an African-American woman and a Caribbean Prime Minister. Ursa moves freely between New York City and Triunion, the fictional Caribbean island on which she was raised and where her family still lives, illustrating the patterns of *transnationalism* (Basch et al.: 1994). As a transnational, Ursa is not only involved in a project to develop a New York inner city area, but also helps to sabotage the re-election of her father, who is complicit in the American neo-colonial exploitation of Triunion. Through the heroines of *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Avey Johnson and Merle Kimbona respectively, Marshall explores the connections between the different foci of the black diaspora. Avey Johnson is a wealthy African-American who awakens to her long-forgotten black self once she is exposed to black cultural practices in a cruise trough the Caribbean. Merle is a Caribbean immigrant in London who, after a stay in her native island, decides to head for Uganda to reunite herself with her African husband and their child.

Marshall's Pan-Africanist stance has been latent since the beginning of her writing career, but has been more overt since the publication of *Daughters*. I would now like to qualify and contextualize Marshall's Pan-Africanism, for different trends fall under this rubric, which has lately been placed under scrutiny by cultural critics and writers. Marshall's aforementioned refusal to accept the "uniqueness" of the Caribbean cultural experience, or of the African-American experience for that matter, also harmonizes with Paul Gilroy's thesis in his work *The Black Atlantic* (1999). Gilroy encourages intellectuals studying black culture "to take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (15). The creation of national canons such as the African-American or the Anglo-Caribbean to study "African diaspora cultures of America and the Caribbean" (15) is for Gilroy an act of "ethnic abolutism" which takes for granted the existence of, for instance, some «authentic African-American essence" (34). Accordingly, Gilroy criticizes the co-optation of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, a black diaspora project, by the African-American literary establishment:

much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property

[...] the idea of the black Atlantic can be used to show that there are other claims to it which can be based on the structure of the African diaspora into the western hemisphere (1997:15).

Gilroy brings into his argument the recent debate over the origins of hip hop culture, an expression of black Atlantic creativity, transplanted from Jamaica to the South Bronx (33), which is now claimed as quintessentially black American.

Naturally, one cannot postulate a homogeneous Pan-African transatlantic community without reservations. Gilroy's critique of ethnic absolutisms is coextensive with his acknowledgement of the cultural heterogeneity and complexity of the black Atlantic and the complexity of the black subject—crisscrossed by class, sexual orientation, gender, and the like, very much on the same line as other contemporary identity theorists (Hall 1994, Cohen 1997) and writers.<sup>6</sup> Besides, in keeping with his anti-essentialist argument, Gilroy criticizes the type of Pan-Africanism that simply reverses the agents of domination. Thus, he opposes the *Africentric* outlook, whose advocates romanticise African history and culture, and set out on a blind journey into a tradition which, Gilroy warns, may imply a return to a no longer viable patriarchy (193-194). At this point it should be pointed out that the persuasiveness of Gilroy's argument is counteracted by the contradictions underlying it. One of its most blatant inconsistencies is that his readers are left to reconcile his critique of Africentricity with his praise of black nationalist thinkers who are notorious for their racial radicalism. Thus, Gilroy praises figures such as Martin Delaney, W.E.B. Du Bois or Marcus Garvey for their ability to “dissolve their African-American sensibility into an explicitly Pan-Africanist discourse” (19).<sup>7</sup> Early in his volume, however, Gilroy acknowledges the instability of his rubric, underlining the “heuristic” character of his concerns and the “provisionality” of his conclusions (x).

Actually, recent studies on black transnationalism (Stephens 1998, San Juan 1999) approach the struggle to produce international political and cultural conceptions of black collective identity as a response to very specific historical conditions during the opening decades of the twentieth century, namely, the exclusion of black subjects from the new world order emerging in the aftermath of World War I—nationhood, self-determination, democracy—and from the ensuing League of Nations. Indeed, Garvey's first UNIA International Convention for the Negro in 1920 was understood to be the black counterpart to the League of Nations, gathering delegates from all the black nations which had been excluded from the 1919 international peace conference (Stephens: 601). Excluded from the nation building processes of both the United States and their imperial European motherlands, Caribbean immigrants to America were forced to imagine alternatives to European nationalism.

These remarks on the strategic nature of Pan-African stances may be instructive when considering Marshall's privileging of a black collective identity over ethnic exceptionalisms, which may be understood as a strategy to negotiate her own identity as the daughter of Barbadian immigrants to the USA:

I think that I am in a unique position. I know that people have trouble defining me as a Black American or Caribbean writer. I fall between two stools, I'm neither West Indian nor Black American. My parents were from the West Indies and they gave me a very strong sense of the culture out of which they came. That was one of the things that moulded me as a person and a writer. Yet on the other hand, I was born in Brooklyn, went to public schools and I'm very much a Black American. I have got my feet in both camps so that I am able to understand and respond to Black American culture as well as West Indian culture (Ogundipe 1989: 33).

She insists on the idea that hers is a "combined heritage [...] at once African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and to a much lesser degree American" (1973: 107). Marshall's fluid definition of cultural identity allows her to amalgamate her black American and Caribbean strands without having to tilt the balance. In the same vein as Gilroy, Marshall opposes ethnic exceptionalism, brandishing a Pan-African, diasporan sensibility that, however, unveils ethnic chauvinisms and class cleavages and conflicts within her imagined black community to a greater extent than Gilroy's.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to deepening her analysis of the New York black community, in *The Fisher King* Marshall extends her diasporan scope to cover the European branches of the black diaspora. In fact, her concern with the life of a black expatriate jazz musician and his family in Paris affords her a unique opportunity to connect the lives of blacks in America with those living elsewhere in the 'Old Continent'.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to their American sojourn, Hattie and young Sonny inhabited an immigrant Parisian ghetto at Rue Sauffroy, where a variegated black community formed after subsequent accretions of different immigrant groups. Hattie, an expatriate African-American who considers France her home and sails gracefully through the Parisian bohemian night, is perceived as "*Une Américaine noire*. A non-believer" (62) by the immigrants—both legals and *sans papiers* (61)—from former French colonies in Africa who dressed in their "long traditional djellabahs and kufi skullcaps" (62) publicize their witchcraft services on the street. Through Madame Moulineaux, a neighbour of Hattie's and Sonny's on Rue Sauffroy, we get a glimpse of French colonial history. Madame Moulineaux, old and alcoholic, clings desperately to the memory of her first husband, a native from Mali—former French Sudan, who died for his Mother Country in the Indochina War. Surprisingly, despite the colonial origin of her own husband, in her alcoholic ravings Madame Moulineaux lashes the Algerian immigrants in these terms:

They had killed the cream of France in their stupid war and now that they were free, independent, instead of staying in the desert where they belonged, they were pouring into la belle France [...] into Paris, into *le quartier*. They had ruined it, *le quartier*. She had lived and worked there all her life and they had ruined it (66).

Madame Moulineaux takes the biased stance of the native black who has witnessed the arrival of black immigrants at the ghetto. However, for all her French chauvinism and bigotry, also evinced by the French flag hanging above her front door, Madame Moulineaux fails to stir our hatred. Her loneliness and destitution prove her love for France to be unrequited.

Marshall's thesis on the sameness of the black experience across national borders is reinforced in her depiction of the Sauffroy ghetto, which is described as "Bed-Stuy at its worst" (215). This move is reminiscent of, for instance, Ursa's juxtaposition —"double exposures [...] the same thing repeated everywhere she went" (292)— of the poverty caused by the neo-colonial exploitation of Triunion by the tourism industry, and the bleakness of the ghetto she is working to rehabilitate in *Daughters*.

Marshall appears to deliver a harsher judgment on the racism inflicted by Europe than on its American counterpart. Whereas Paris and other European cities eagerly welcomed and promoted black jazz musicians who, like Everett Payne, fled American racism and the country's lack of a congenial cultural climate in the 1950s,<sup>10</sup> there was a racist backlash in the mid-1960s, an upsurge of French nationalism perhaps caused by the loss of Algeria earlier that decade. Thus, Everett died half destitute in the subway station in 1969, as he was being chased by policemen who accused him of being an illegal. In contrast, Edgar, Everett's brother, fared much better in Brooklyn, where he became a wealthy real estate agent. Furthermore, there is a suggestion at the end of the novel that Edgar intends to adopt little Sonny in order to give him a better life than the one awaiting him in the French ghetto where he lived before coming to New York.

## 5. Conclusion

The appendage of a layered Parisian black ghetto —made up of native blacks, African-American expatriates, blacks from the former French colonies, African *sans papiers*— to the diasporan map drawn by Marshall in *The Fisher King* attests to the increasing diaspora sensibility that unfolds as her novels progress. The 'European encroachment' that Marshall launches in her first novel for nine years, and for the first time in her writing career, reinforces her analysis of the similarities between black experiences across ethnic lines and geographical borders. Thus, Marshall's

voice joins the ongoing debate over Pan-Africanism and diaspora led by cultural critics like Paul Gilroy or Stuart Hall, and other black writers of Caribbean descent like Caryl Phillips. In addition, by engaging in a close study of a black New York neighbourhood, Marshall makes a strong statement on the diversity within black communities themselves, and the deeply-entrenched rifts that continue to breach different black ethnic groups over the years. As I had tried to show, *The Fisher King* enlarges upon many of the questions that Marshall had originally posed in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, her trajectory coming full circle in the new novel.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. Paule Marshall's literary work spans more than four decades. She chose Barbadian Brooklyn (Barbadian referring to the Caribbean island of Barbados) as the subject of her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Her second publication, the collection of novellas titled *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), moves from "Brooklyn" to "Barbados" to "British Guiana" to "Brazil". Here Marshall works with a wide canvas that stretches from Brooklyn to Brazil, including the Caribbean, in order to examine the connections between different people in different parts of the world. Though the Caribbean figures prominently in the Marshall's next two novels, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), these are more concerned with exploring the diaspora formed by people of African descent. In the same year the latter was published, a selection of short stories came out under the title of *Reena and Other Stories* (1983), which was followed by *Daughters* (1991), Marshall's fourth novel. After a silence of nine years the author has published her fifth novel, *The Fisher King* (2000).

<sup>2</sup>. The terms *race* and *ethnicity* are often used interchangeably. After the fascist excesses of the 1930s and 1940s, Werner Sollors explains, race began to be discussed as ethnicity, a less loaded term (1986). For the purpose of my argument, I attach different meanings to race and

ethnicity, using the latter to refer to the regional and cultural peculiarities that differentiate people belonging to the same race. The label *intra-racial* thus points to the differences and conflicts within black communities on ethnic grounds.

<sup>3</sup>. The north central Brooklyn neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant derives its name from two 19th century middle-class neighbourhoods. Bedford began as a farming hamlet in woodlands that the Dutch West India Company purchased from the Canarsee Indians in the 1600s, historians speculate it was named after the Duke of Bedford. Stuyvesant Heights bears the name of Peter Stuyvesant, director general of New Netherland during the 1600s (Blair 2003).

<sup>4</sup>. For further information about these corporations check [www.ritecenter.org/bsrchistory.html](http://www.ritecenter.org/bsrchistory.html) and [www.loc.gov/bicentennial/propage/NY/ny-10\\_h\\_towns1.html](http://www.loc.gov/bicentennial/propage/NY/ny-10_h_towns1.html).

<sup>5</sup>. For further information regarding the *PICCED* report, check [www.picced.org/NewDesign/ccpcb.htm](http://www.picced.org/NewDesign/ccpcb.htm).

<sup>6</sup>. See "Travel Writing and Postcoloniality: Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic*



Sound” (López Roperó 2003) for an exploration of Black British writer —of Caribbean descent— Caryl Phillips’s sharp critique of Pan-Africanism and contemporary black Zionist movements.

7. Pan-African movements advocate the return to Africa and the idea of a common fate for African people scattered throughout the world by the transatlantic slave trade. Some of the most prominent pan-African intellectuals and activists —Edward Blyden, Marcus Garvey and Aimé Césaire— are from the Caribbean-American community. Throughout the nineteenth century, an emergent black nationalism combined with the abolitionist ideology that eventually put an end to slavery, favoured the creation of pioneer settlements in Africa, mainly in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Kenya. These settlements were populated by African repatriates from all over the world. Edward Blyden, from the Dutch West Indies, became Liberia’s Prime Minister and most distinguished citizen. After living through the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean and the Reconstruction period in US with its Jim Crow laws, Blyden became an advocate of the return idea, seeing himself as a Black Moses leading an exodus of blacks to Africa. Another important Caribbean visionary was Jamaican Marcus Garvey. In the 1920s he created the largest Pan-African organization, the *Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)*, with headquarters in Harlem, but spread all over the world. Garvey’s dream was a strong and united African continent —the ‘United States of Africa’— that would be respected by all nations. He also established a foothold in Liberia. The *Négritude* movement, created by Martinican Aimé Césaire —Francophone Caribbean— in 1945, drew upon all these

sources, emphasizing self-pride, African heritage and a spiritual return to the homeland (Harris 1993).

8. Marshall’s wish to detach herself from any specific ethnic group contrasts with the claims made on her by both the Caribbean and the African-American literary establishments. She is thus included in works as different as Emmanuel Nelson’s *Contemporary African American Novelists. A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1999), Katherine Payant and Toby Rose’s *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature* (1999) or in Boyce and Fido’s *Out of the Kumbia. Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) and Simon Gikandi’s *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (1992), although she is conspicuous by her absence in Daryl Dance’s *Fifty Caribbean Writers*. Reviewers of her latest novel, who praise Marshall as one of the premier African-American voices, go so far as to dissolve the Paynes and MacCullums into one “African-American family” (Lynch 2001: par. 4).

9. The author has focused on the Caribbean and the US, mainly Brooklyn, as the setting for her novels. European settings are scarce in her fiction, with the sole exception of Merle Kimbona’s non-narrated London sojourn in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.

10. The novel’s title comes from an Arthurian legend about a wounded king who is imprisoned in his castle, waiting for a knight to come and heal him and protect him. Marshall has acknowledged her recourse to this legend as a metaphor for the need for the community to protect the black artist (Stander 2001, par. 5).

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