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The Profane Ear: Regimes of Aural Discipline in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*

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In Paule Marshall's 2001 novel *The Fisher King*, one of the novel's central protagonists, Sonny-Rett Payne, spends his childhood enduring a rigorous and unusual form of musical training: he must diligently practice classical music on an old player piano (also known as a "self-playing" or automatic piano) under the watchful eye of his mother, Ulene, a Barbadian immigrant to Brooklyn. Sonny-Rett, a musical prodigy, quickly masters the player piano's classical standards. His playing is, at first, source of pride for Ulene, who yearns to see Sonny-Rett "in the white people big Carnegie Hall playing their music better than them" (Marshall 175). However, when he later becomes captivated by jazz, and practices this new genre of music on the player piano instead of the classical music it is designed to play, Ulene's response is swift and harsh—she beats him with a strap every time she catches him playing jazz at home or shopping for jazz records in a local record store. Viewing mastery of classical music as Sonny-Rett's only legitimate route to social and economic upward mobility in a pre-Civil Rights era United States, Ulene's disciplinary tactics betray her curious hope that, in the absence of civil rights for black folks, Sonny-Rett might instead make an alternative claim to rights and national belonging through music.

Sonny-Rett, however, determined to pursue a career as a jazz musician, flees his mother's discipline and the climate of U.S. racism in the 1950s for Paris. After a period of profound success as a renowned jazz pianist, his career unceremoniously falls into ruin after the passage of cabaret laws barring black musicians from employment in Parisian cabarets. In a climactic scene, Sonny-Rett, disillusioned by unemployment, is stopped by the police under suspicion of being undocumented. When they demand to see his residency card, Sonny-Rett refuses to present it and instead echoes Ulene's alternative claim of belonging: he directs the officers to the image of his face on a billboard outside of a prominent Parisian cabaret where he once headlined. He tells the police "they could find [his residency card] hanging above the entrance to a certain nightclub on rue Monge" (Marshall 203). An altercation with the police quickly ensues, and Sonny-Rett dies under mysterious circumstances; it is left unclear in the novel whether the police throw him—or he throws himself—down a long flight of concrete stairs leading into the Châtelet train station, the largest underground train station in the world. Sonny-Rett exhibits a curious faith in his musical renown to corroborate his claim to citizenship, though the authorities refuse to recognize his as a legitimate claim. Thus, Sonny-Rett is twice a victim to parallel prohibitions: first, Ulene's domestic prohibitions on listening to and playing jazz in order to position Sonny-Rett as a belonging member of a white U.S. body politic, and next, Paris' municipal prohibitions against black jazz musicians to guard a white French body politic from the incursions of black "foreigners" like Sonny-Rett. In both cases, restrictions on aural experience and musical forms coincide with anti-black notions of national belonging and cultural integrity.

These two critical chapters in Sonny-Rett's life illustrate *The Fisher King's* foregrounding of the soundscape as an important site for black subjects to negotiate claims of belonging (national, diasporic, or otherwise) that ultimately incurs heavy surveillance and suppression by both domestic and state actors. By "disciplining" the soundscape—barring the aural experience and circulation of black musical forms, such as jazz—black cultural production is cast as improper and anti-national. In turn, black subjects are obliquely targeted for exclusion or extermination under the guise of seemingly neutral regulations that indict music and musical venues rather than subjects.¹ "Aural discipline," then, extends beyond demands and restrictions on music; instead, Marshall situates these restrictions within the context of a broader, global political economy of anti-blackness that stigmatizes black cultural production—especially when it provides gainful employment for black people—in order to deny black subjects a stable place in the body politic.

In this piece, I trace Marshall's depictions of "aural discipline" in order to elaborate both how sound perception and production become ways for black subjects to stage claims of belonging (national and otherwise) and how prohibitions of sound—which are often coupled with corporeal and economic punishment, enacted through force of law—push back against these claims to sonic space and belonging. "Belonging" here extends beyond the nation; Marshall's characters listen to and perform jazz as an enactment of global black solidarity as much as a claim to national belonging. Sonny-Rett's vulnerability to punishment and exclusion even in his childhood home illustrate how, for Marshall, jazz both links and divides Afro-diasporic communities who grapple with the often-conflicting demands of black middle class respectability and the liberatory possibilities of black solidarity. Marshall's novel, however, captures the implicit racism of anti-jazz legislation and public sentiment across continents in order to stress the ongoing

¹ One contemporary example of the ways that displacement and destruction of black communities occurs through recourse to calls for restrictions on black musical forms is the recent disputes over a drummer's circle in Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem in 2007. The drummers, a group of black musicians who have for decades assembled on a weekly basis to play music together, were the targets of noise complaints issued by the residents of a newly-erected luxury apartment complex across the street. Overlooking the ways that the residents themselves were agents of gentrification pushing longtime residents out of their communities, they cited instead their rights to "aural privacy" and turned to noise laws as recourse. One resident was reported as praising gentrification's capacity to rid the community of "these 'people'" and calling for the drummers to be lynched. Ultimately, the drummer's circle was relocated to another, less accessible part of the park. Of note here is that the ostensibly neutral language of noise quickly gives way to calls for black displacement and enactments of extreme violence against black subjects. Finally, it is significant that the noise is framed as an invasion of residents' right to privacy—noise is deployed here as a metonym for black subjects themselves, imagined as trespassing in spaces they do not have a right to be in. For more, see Agnes Johnson, "In Marcus Garvey Park, gentrifiers vs. drummers" (2007), and Timothy Williams, "An Old Sound in Harlem Draws New Neighbors' Ire" (2008).

urgency of global black solidarity, especially in the face of contemporary forms of violence whose anti-black logics are subtler, masked with the rhetoric of patriotism and calls to guard the physical and cultural borders of the nation.

Several writers, such as Caroline Rosenthal and John Lowney, have instructively examined the role of jazz in *The Fisher King* as a central character and critical structural motif. This essay, however, reframes this discussion by calling attention to the interconnected sonic disciplinary regimes that designate jazz as a threat or pollutant, and examining the motivations of these structures and the mechanisms by which they seek to control, suppress, or exterminate forms of black music and the black musicians who play them. The criminalization of jazz in the novel follows the historical and fundamentally anti-black condemnation of jazz in the interwar period as too obscene, flagrant, foreign, and undisciplined to have a place in national culture in both the United States and France.

The Fisher King relates the story of a generations-long antagonism between two black families spanning from the 1920s to 1980s in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn who must come together to commemorate the life of the family member at the heart of the family's enmity: Sonny-Rett. Sonny-Rett achieves widespread musical renown in 1940s Brooklyn and 1950s Paris, but his decision to pursue the path of a jazz musician becomes the source of great contention between the family's two matriarchs—Ulene Payne and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, respectively Sonny-Rett's mother and mother-in-law. The novel follows the perspective of Sonny, a nine-year-old boy of the family's youngest generation who is named after his grandfather, the aforementioned Sonny-Rett.² While Sonny-Rett's self-training as a jazz musician is the catalyzing action that creates irresolvable fissures in the two families, his grandson Sonny's travels from Paris to Brooklyn in the 1980s to attend a memorial concert for Sonny-Rett and meet his family for the first time becomes the occasion to confront these longstanding tensions.

The black matriarchs of the two families—Barbadian-American immigrant Ulene Payne and Georgia native Florence Varina McCullum-Jones—make great sacrifices to rigorously train their respective son (Sonny-Rett Payne) and daughter (Cherisse) in European classical music and American musical theater in the hopes that they will subvert the very traditions that have long been cited as symbols of white cultural supremacy. In other words, while Ulene and Florence appear to uncritically embrace a kind of respectability politics, Marshall complicates this notion by contextualizing their aspirations for their children within their own past and present struggles against American white supremacy. Both Ulene and Florence hope to see their children undermine white cultural institutions expressly through

² “Everett Payne” is Sonny-Rett Payne's birth name; however, he is donned “Sonny-Rett” after his first formal musical performance, and he adopts that name from that moment forward. To distinguish him from his grandson, I will always refer to the jazz musician as “Sonny-Rett” and his grandson as “Sonny”.

their successes within them. Ulene dreams after reflecting on her own demeaning experiences as a housemaid that one day Sonny-Rett will appear headline at Carnegie Hall and Florence endures humiliation by her white employer in the hopes that her daughter Cherisse will become “[a]nother Lena Horne...or Dorothy Dandridge” (Marshall 36, 173).

Jazz, on the other hand, is regarded by the families’ matriarchs as the musical tradition that foils their hopes for their children. Sonny-Rett abandons his regimented classical training under his mother, Ulene, to pursue a career as a jazz musician; Cherisse similarly abandons her training in music and dance under her mother, Florence, when she marries Sonny-Rett and flees to Paris with him as he pursues his jazz career abroad. Ulene and Florence associate jazz with sexual impropriety, profanity, and ignobility: Ulene refers to jazz only as “Sodom and Gomorrah music” and Florence refers to Sonny-Rett as a “so-and-so” who ruins Cherisse’s chances to fulfill her potential to become an American cultural and musical icon. Jazz simultaneously acts as the vehicle for characters’ liberation from the burden of their parents’ expectations for race leadership and the pursuit that marks them for unrelenting discipline and regulation.

This essay unfolds in three parts: First, I elaborate the ways that Sonny-Rett is distinguished as a musical virtuoso who often confounds attempts at discipline. Next, I discuss the sonic disciplinary regime of Sonny-Rett’s childhood home, examining the imagery of military force and state mechanisms of criminalization and punishment that coalesce around the home. Finally, I close by examining examples of legislation in New York and Paris that targeted black musicians and indicted black cultural production as primitive, licentious, and threatening to the nation. By viewing these laws alongside Marshall’s narrative of Sonny-Rett’s death at the hands of the police in Paris, I elucidate how notions of racial and sexual respectability and cultural purity operate in league with mechanisms of aural discipline to keep black subjects at the margins of citizenship.

THE PROFANE EAR

Sonny-Rett, who is present only through the recollections of others, is distinguished throughout the novel as a prodigy with exceptional musical acuity. He learns to play classical piano by chasing the movement of keys on an old player piano before ever receiving formal training; he is regarded as a master of improvisation, who bridges jazz, blues, European classical, and American popular musical traditions; and he achieves both local and international renown for his original compositions and iconic performances in the United States and France. He is indeed described as having supernatural hearing: he listens beyond the threshold of human hearing and accesses divine soundscapes. Despite his acclaim, however, he becomes the target

of overwhelming regulation and repression in both domestic and public arenas. His powers of hearing and sounding blend high and low traditions, and merge the sacred with the profane. By mobilizing his musical skill toward the pursuit of jazz, Sonny-Rett rejects the politics of respectability that sustain fantasies of black upward mobility as an escape from racial prejudice.

Sonny-Rett is distinctive, in large part, because of the ways he embodies his unusual gift for music in his posture and countenance. One of the first descriptions of Sonny-Rett appears in his lover, Hattie's, recollections of his first, and most iconic, performance at the Putnam Royal, a fictional concert hall in Bed-Stuy that will later serve as the site of his memorial concert. Hattie describes Sonny-Rett's movements as slow and absentminded, his eyes just barely open, "like a curtain he occasionally drew aside a fraction of an inch to peer out at the world. A world far less interesting than the music inside his head" (Marshall 134).

For Sonny-Rett, vision is the realm of the unimaginative, of the existing conditions of the exterior world, of that which is "far less interesting". Hearing, however, represents for him the realm of interiority and creative possibility. The image of a "curtain" invokes the home, a site where Sonny-Rett fails to perform musically in conventional and accepted ways. It also signifies Sonny-Rett's curious opacity both to the reader and to his loved ones. As readers, we can only know Sonny-Rett secondhand, as another character's memory or anecdote. To other characters in the novel, he is an enigmatic genius who continuously surprises and repulses with his ability to transform classical musical standards into fresh and unrecognizable creations through improvisation.

The narrator also spends a great deal of time describing the trademark posture Sonny-Rett adopts when he is improvising. At his first public performance, Sonny-Rett initially scandalizes his audience—who is expecting a jazz performance—by faithfully playing a Tin Pan Alley classic, "Sonny Boy," a hit American pop song of the late 1920s.³ However, once he is finished playing the original song, he assumes a distinctive posture and, to the shock and awe of the audience, transforms the song through improvisation into "Sonny Boy Blue," a jazz rendition of the classic. As Hattie recalls:

he hunched closer to the piano, angled his head sharply to the left, completely closed the curtain of his gaze, and with his hands commanding the length and breadth of the keyboard he unleashed a dazzling pyrotechnic of chords (you could almost see their colors),

³ "Tin Pan Alley" was a group of iconic lyricists, songwriters, and music publishers who were responsible for producing a great deal of popular music in the late 19th and early 20th century United States. The song "Sonny Boy" was written for singer and actor Al Jolson for the 1928 film *The Singing Fool*.

polyrhythms, seemingly unrelated harmonies, and ideas—fresh, brash, outrageous ideas (Marshall 137).

As Sonny-Rett assumes his stance—with his left ear angled toward the piano and his right ear angled toward the sky—he “completely close[s] the curtain of his gaze”; again, vision is figured as a sense that must be barred in order for him to engage in his creative process.

Fascinatingly, however, when Sonny-Rett closes his eyes, he produces a synesthetic experience for his audience—they can both hear and *see* the notes he’s playing. Tsitsi Jaji offers a masterful and useful reading of synesthesia in her examination of South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile’s poetry. As Jaji describes:

Synaesthesia refers to Kgositsile’s blurring of the modes of sense perception, particularly vision and hearing, to perform a solidarity among the senses which can be read as an aesthetic parallel of the search for solidarity between Black Americans and South Africans in exile....In numerous examples of sound experienced through multiple sensory modalities, intimacy between the senses figures a Relation of solidarity between diasporic music and (pan-)African visionary or embodied experience (293).

Following Jaji’s reading, Sonny-Rett stands here as a bridge between African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities in Bed-Stuy. By demonstrating his mastery and respect for an African-American musical tradition, Sonny-Rett—the child of an Afro-Barbadian mother—makes a sensory gesture toward building solidarity between these communities as they grapple with powerful historical tensions.

Indeed, we see this tension illustrated by the animosity between Sonny-Rett’s mother, Ulene, and his mother-in-law, Florence. Florence, for instance, refers pejoratively to Caribbean-Americans as “W.I.’s” and “monkey chasers” (Marshall 38). Florence views West Indians—Ulene and her sons, Sonny-Rett and Edgar, in particular—as classless, deceptive, and “underhanded” (Marshall 38). On the other hand, Ulene’s embrace of European classical music and rejection of jazz suggests that she is disinterested in seeing Sonny-Rett express identification or solidarity with the African-American community, and instead aspires for him to be embraced by white audiences. Both women represent versions of a classist and racist respectability politics that rejects global black solidarity as an effective strategy of survival, and instead embraces the promises of white cultural and racial supremacy and capital accumulation. Sonny-Rett, however, not only embraces jazz, but forms intimate partnerships with two African-American women, Hattie and

Cherisse (Florence's daughter). He uses his skills as an occasion to forge black solidarities through his intimate rapports with his audience and his lovers.

Sonny-Rett not only bridges diasporic communities, but also earthly and divine realms. Hattie describes Sonny-Rett's right ear as "directed skyward, hearing up there, in the Upper Room among the stars Mahalia sang about, a new kind of music: splintered, atonal, profane, and possessing a wonderful dissonance that spoke to him, to his soul-case. For him, this was the true music of the spheres, of the maelstrom up there" (Marshall 137).⁴ As Sonny-Rett experiences it, the divine soundscape does not obey the same laws of order, harmony, consonance, and key that govern European classical traditions. Instead, it is disunited and, in a literal sense, out of key; "atonalism," or the absence of a unifying key, suggests a decentered musical work, or one that has multiple, ever-shifting tonal centers. The heavenly soundscape appears to be governed not by order and uniformity, but by chaos, variety, and contradiction. This is, of course, not simply a comment on musical paradigms, but a reflection on the framing of black subjects as threats to white order and unity—a framing that often appeals to the divine as a justification for its exercises. By experiencing the heavens as a site of aural "dissonance" and highlighting the coexistence of dissimilar elements as the mark of the divine, Sonny-Rett destabilizes a major spiritual and ideological foundation of white supremacy. Viewed in this way, Sonny-Rett's musical innovations are both aurally and ideologically disruptive.

Sonny-Rett's left ear, on the other hand, is described as "earthbound," rather than attuned to the divine as his right ear is:

It remained earthbound, trained on the bedrock that for him was Bach and the blues. All those years dutifully practicing Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, et al. on the old t'row-off player piano; and later, all those afternoons sneaking into Birdell's to listen to Muddy, Basie, Tatum, et al., never mind the beatings that followed. You heard them, both Bach and the hard, pure lyricism of the blues in that powerful, driving, disciplined left hand of his (Marshall 137).

Sonny-Rett's left ear and left hand are the sites where his classical and blues training coalesce; it is the site of "discipline". Where his right ear permits him to transcend convention, his left ear keeps him rooted in tradition. It is noteworthy that the meeting of tradition and innovation, discipline and disorderliness, are rendered in terms of "right" and "left". In ways, Sonny-Rett's posture defies connotations of the left and right in politics: where the "right" typically denotes tradition, order, and conservatism, the "left" denotes change, upheaval, and

⁴ Here, the text refers to gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's song "In the Upper Room," where the "upper room" is a reference to heaven. Her career spanned the 1930s to the 1970s.

radicalism. Sonny's ears and hands appear to reverse these poles. This reversal challenges us, in part, to view Sonny-Rett as an agent who upends all traditions and categories, who transverses borders and induces curious cross-pollinations. Further, we might productively read Sonny-Rett's improvisation through the lens of what Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz describe as the link between improvisation and rights, viewing "improvisation as a means to speak free of constraint; improvisation as a means to assemble alternative forms of community; and improvisation as a critique of dominant structures of thought" (4). Thus, improvisation for Sonny-Rett is at once claim to freedom, gesture of community building, and critique of white supremacy's taxonomical impulses.

The challenges Sonny-Rett poses to institutions such as the state (as I discuss later), however, makes one part of his biography particularly difficult to read: he owes a great deal of his performance experience and hybrid musical style to his time in the army. Sonny-Rett is prohibited from, and often caught, listening to blues and jazz in the neighborhood's local record store, Birdell's. However, after leaving home to join the army, in exile from his childhood home, he is exposed to a range of musical styles and performance opportunities. As the narrator recounts,

He was lucky to not have been sent overseas, and luckier still that he got to play a lot of piano, and all kinds of music at that: the oompah-pah, military stuff in the band, light classics and pop tunes in the officers' club, jazz in the combo they had on the base. And the blues. The base was near Kansas City so that he got to hear and occasionally even to play some pure down-home Kansas City blues. That had helped his own playing a lot. The army? It had given him a chance to do some serious woodshedding (Marshall 135).

As is typical for Sonny-Rett, a character who confounds the logics of every setting he occupies, all forms of discipline backfire. Just as his classical musical training leads him to become a vanguard that blurs its boundaries rather than a disciple that protects them, his training in the army becomes the occasion for him to master the skillset of a musician rather than that of a soldier. When Hattie asks him about his time in the army, he recounts very little about his responsibilities as a soldier—he has been training while in the army, but it is the wrong, or an unintended, form of training. Sonny-Rett's time in the army, however, is one example of his penchant for gravitating toward alternative and improvisatory modes of musical study. After all, he learns to play classical music on a player piano, an instrument that was never intended to act as a pedagogical tool.

Sonny-Rett's hearing is advanced and sensitive and his playing places disparate forms and communities in unusual relations and solidarities. The way he moves his body through space, listens, learns music, and performs, however,

commands the energies of a number of disciplinary agents. In particular, Ulene, Sonny-Rett's mother, is one of the most prominent agents of discipline in the novel. While Ulene governs Sonny-Rett strictly at home, she forbids him from returning once he leaves after learning that he will not relent in his pursuit of jazz. His simultaneous flight and expulsion from home is the initial form of exile that leads him to his time as an expatriate in Paris. The domestic realm, thus, seem to inaugurate the fatal forms of discipline abroad that Sonny-Rett later experiences from the state.

DISCIPLINARY DWELLINGS

The iconic Bed-Stuy brownstones on Macon Street, the opening site of the novel where Ulene raises her sons, are depicted as highly militarized and ardently policed. The novel opens with Sonny-Rett's grandson, Sonny's, description of the architectural features of the brownstones: "Because of the raised, high-stepping stoops, the brown uniform houses made him think of an army goosestepping toward an enemy that was a mirror image of itself across the street" (Marshall 14).⁵ The goose-step, a military march associated with totalitarianism and state violence, links the architecture of Sonny-Rett's childhood home with Nazi Germany.⁶ By mobilizing such charged imagery to describe the brownstones, Marshall envisions the home as a geography of repression rather than a welcoming or nurturing space, in ways echoing what Salamishah Tillet describes in the post-civil rights era as "civic estrangement," or "the paradox post-civil rights African Americans experience as simultaneous citizens and 'non-citizens,' who experience the feelings of disillusionment and melancholia of non-belonging and a yearning for civic membership" (3). While Sonny-Rett is raised in a pre-civil rights United States, his inability to find a space of belonging (in spite of his renown) in his childhood home, the United States, or France because of his racial identity and work as a jazz musician nevertheless reflects a similar conundrum.

In spite of the curated, uniform exteriors of the brownstones, we learn that the interior of Ulene's home is in squalor: it has a "dank, musty, stale-kitchen smell" and "little light," and where there is light, it "reveal[s] a shameful state of neglect and dirt everywhere. Cracked and peeling walls. Large turds of dust like

⁵ The imagery of the militarized brownstone appears several decades before in the opening lines of her 1959 classic *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: "In the somnolent July afternoon the unbroken line of brownstone houses down the long Brooklyn street resembled *an army massed at attention*" (Marshall *BGB* 1).

⁶ It is worth noting that jazz was banned in Nazi Germany and derided as an unsophisticated, primitive art form using anti-black logics not unlike those used to justify its rejection in the United States. For more, see Kater's *Different Drummers*.

tumbleweed. Overhead, the rusted pipes of a defunct sprinkler system lined what had once been a beautiful coffered ceiling. Underfoot, the filthy hall runner was worn clear through to the floorboards down its center” (Marshall 17). The house’s exterior projection of force and strength is countered by its pitiful state of affairs in the interior. One essential inconsistency in the squalor of Ulene’s home, however, is the player piano, the only item in her home that is cleaned, polished, and well preserved. The player piano, an item she acquired secondhand while working as a housemaid, is an emblem of grief, the last remaining relic of her aspirational hopes for Sonny-Rett which have been dashed by his pursuit of jazz and untimely death.

During Sonny-Rett’s childhood, Ulene boasts stringent rules about which kinds and durations of sound are permissible in her home, and is described as having a “tone” that intimidates the subjects of her discipline into compliance.⁷ Edgar, Sonny-Rett’s brother, recalls with pain the “sound of the strap” that Ulene once used to beat Sonny Rett whenever she caught him playing jazz on the player piano or listening to it at the local record store. He remarks: “I can still hear to this day the sound of the strap the times Ulene caught him playing what he wasn’t supposed to be playing or spotted him hanging out in that record store...listening to what he wasn’t supposed to be listening to” (Marshall 87). Edgar’s language here—describing Sonny-Rett getting “caught” doing what he “wasn’t supposed to be” doing—illustrates that there is an explicit set of prohibitions around music in Ulene’s household, and that to defy them is, in effect, to commit a crime. The traumatic sonic experience of hearing Sonny-Rett get beaten is one that haunts Edgar and echoes into his aural present—he “still hear[s] it to this day” (Marshall 94).

Additionally, over the course of the novel, Ulene never refers to jazz by its name, but rather, as “Sodom and Gomorrah music”. By refusing to name the musical form, and instead associating it with Sodom and Gomorrah, she represents it as sacrilegious, associated with sin, vice, and sexual deviancy.⁸ Just as the biblical “cry” of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah reached the ears of God and elicited

⁷ Upon Sonny’s visit to his grandmother Ulene’s home, she quells any attempt to question or challenge her authority with sharp rejoinders. Sonny remarks, “Her tone! He quickly did as he was ordered” (Marshall 97).

⁸ Notably, Sonny-Rett does spend his adult life in an unconventional three-partner relationship with both Cherisse and Hattie, Sonny’s caretaker. Cherisse and Hattie are suggested to be lovers, and the text explicitly shows they are both intimate with Sonny-Rett, with each other’s full knowledge and consent. As Rosamond King remarks: “This triangle is not a physical ménage à trois; there are no indications that all three ever have sex together. Rather it is an unconventional relationship involving two women and one man, but instead of the women feuding over the man or the man hiding his relationship with one woman from the other, the triangle is united, with all three partners knowing that each person loves the other” (544). King further highlights that in *The Fisher King*, “[f]or the first time in Marshall’s oeuvre we find characters who are comfortable with loves and desires that do not fit a monogamous heterosexual model” (545).

their destruction, the sound of Sonny Rett playing jazz induces Ulene's harsh and righteous discipline.⁹ Jazz, in Ulene's view, is not only criminal, but sinful—a rhetoric of ethics that also appears in the language of anti-jazz laws in this period.

Ulene's disciplinary gestures also stretch backward in time—she is tortured by noises of the past and often attempts to exact mechanisms of discipline and restriction onto bygone soundscapes. Ulene habitually yells the same command at tenants that no longer seem to be there. Her grandson Sonny describes her yelling: “‘Turn off the lights and the blasted radios up there!’ The woman suddenly shouting like a drill sergeant up the dark and silent stairs” (Marshall 18). The description of the stairs as “dark and silent” is an indication that the noises she believes she's hearing are not actually occurring—not, at least, in the present.

The characterization of Ulene herself as a “drill sergeant,” or military authority, appears explicitly here for the first time, as she attempts to prevent unwanted sound from coming across the radio. The juxtaposition of the disruptive radio with the protected and beloved player piano is both historically and ideologically significant. The player piano is an automatic piano that contains a perforated scroll on which pre-programmed music is inscribed—in effect, it is a piano that plays itself. The player piano, which saw the height of its popularity in the first three decades of the twentieth century rapidly declined in popularity with the advent of the radio and other sound reproduction technologies, like the gramophone, which permitted listeners to hear exact replications of pre-recorded music via cheaper technologies. In a sense, then, the radio is partially “responsible” for the player piano's obsolescence. Additionally, where the player piano represents a kind of disciplined predictability—it always plays the same song in the same way, according to the instructions on the scroll—the radio represents unpredictability: anything can come over the airwaves at any time.

Ulene's aversion to the radio is rooted in a desire to meticulously govern the soundscape of her home, to maintain predictability and order. Ulene's desire for predictability and stability conflicts with Sonny-Rett's yearning for unpredictability, upheaval, and change. She is, however, caught in a kind of time loop where she continuously fails to maintain this sonic order. For Ulene, the past is not stably located in the past, but registers in her sensory present—her work as

⁹ Here, I refer to the biblical legend of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities renowned for being hotbeds of sin and unholy deviation—in particular, of same-sex relations. God responds by completely destroying both cities, sparing only Lot (Abraham's nephew) and his family. In Genesis 18:20-21 (KJV), God declares to Abraham, “Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me”. In Genesis 19:13 (KJV), the angels of the Lord that are sent to destroy the cities declare, “we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.” In both instances, the cities are described as incubating sin so great it cries out in the ears of the Lord; it becomes audible.

an authority figure who presides over the soundscape is never over expressly because perceived transgressions to sonic order are infinitely repeated across past, present, and future time. Sound demonstrates an uncanny power to transcend time for the members of the family—whether through the voices of roomers that Ulene incessantly hears or the sound of the strap that Edgar continues to hear through time.

I have thus far considered the architectures and disciplinary structures of domestic spaces in terms of the ways they draw on the techniques and language of the state to authenticate and enact their authority. Next, I transition from examining the disciplinary programs of the home and calling attention to those of the state. This movement marks a shift from domestic programs of aural discipline—where individual characters like Sonny-Rett incur prohibitions and demands on the kind of music he listens to and plays—and toward public, legal orders of discipline, where Sonny-Rett is caught up in large scale municipal bans against jazz. Here, Marshall points to the ways that the state steps in to obstruct the circulation and growing popularity of jazz. The two primary national settings of the novel are twentieth-century Brooklyn and Paris, where characters experience various forms of social, economic, and legal anti-blackness. Jazz music and jazz venues provide occasions for belonging, community, and self-expression that the household and the state mutually deny.

The home in *The Fisher King* is not a site of comfort, nostalgia, or reassurance, but a site of trauma, repression, discipline, and estrangement that necessitates—especially for Sonny-Rett—similar tactics of evasion and resistance as life under the laws he experiences in Paris. Abroad, he finds himself confronted by an even more damaging and deadly form of soundscape regulation administered by the state. In the next section, I will examine how forms of racial and sonic prejudice and exclusion appear on a larger scale in Sonny Rett’s time in Paris. The novel’s linkage of these phenomena throws into relief how soundscape regulation becomes a furtive tactic of anti-black racism—one that is integral to colonial management—that bars black subjects from inclusion in notions of national belonging.

ANTI-JAZZ LAWS IN NYC & PARIS

Sonny Rett’s perceived capacity to act as a musical and moral pollutant echoes similar fears in New York City and Paris in the interwar period and beyond about jazz’s capacity to corrupt the spaces it inhabits. In New York City, jazz musicians faced several decades of restriction under “cabaret laws” that targeted nightclubs, speakeasies, and other venues where black performers found steady work and interfaced with racially mixed audiences. These venues—which often provided a

less formal and more intimate rapport between performer and audience because of the absence of a traditional stage—were regarded as hotbeds of depravity that threatened to tarnish the city’s reputation as a cultural capital. The specific fear was of illicit sex: that a seductive performance could become intimate contact without the formality of the stage, and even more, that the whites and blacks who fraternized there would violate the ideals of white purity that segregation sought to protect. The laws appeared at the juncture of a boom of black artistic innovation in the Harlem Renaissance, and a sociopolitical climate of racial segregation and racialized violence in the era of Jim Crow.

Conversely, the Paris of the interwar period presented itself to many black expatriates as a racial paradise where the baggage of American racism was absent, and where black art, music, and business thrived. However, similar laws restricting opportunities for black jazz musicians appeared in this period and, in later decades, the rise and fall of the Nazi-allied Vichy regime in the 40s and intensification of racist and xenophobic sentiment the aftermath of the Algerian War in the 60s quickly revealed Paris to be a parallel site of racial unrest.¹⁰ In both cases, however, laws that restricted the circulation of black music were never explicitly racially coded—they instead adopted the language of patriotism, citing the preservation of accepted national cultural forms, rejection of moral laxity, and the protection of privileged laborers and consumers.

From 1926 to 1990, cabarets in New York City were placed under extreme scrutiny (Chevigny 1). In the language of municipal law, a “cabaret” described “any room, place or space in the city in which any musical entertainment, singing, dancing or other similar amusement is permitted in connection with the restaurant business or the business of directly or indirectly selling the public food or drink” (Proceedings of the Board of Alderman 573). Cabaret laws policed these venues by requiring that they acquire costly cabaret licenses and, beginning in the 1940s, that performers acquire cabaret identification cards (Chevigny 56-7). In order to be considered for a license, performers had to, among other things, be fingerprinted by the police and judged, by uncertain standards, to be “of good character” (Chevigny 58). Notably, however, similar forms of entertainment in large hotels were exempt from these regulations, suggesting that these laws were as much about barring black performers’ access to capital and impeding the growing popularity of jazz joints in black neighborhoods like Harlem as they were about moral and cultural concerns (Chevigny 33).

¹⁰ For more on African-Americans in Paris in the interwar period, see Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: a Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop’s Paris: African-American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars* (2015).

Further, there were attempts to regulate not just the venues but also the music itself. Before the cabaret laws, the New York State Legislature passed the Cotillo Law in 1922 to outlaw both jazz and all dancing on Broadway after midnight (Brunn 175). Both forms of legislation responded to popular associations between jazz, promiscuity, and other forms of “immorality”. Proponents of the law argued that jazz was tarnishing the city’s reputation. Visitors were coming to New York City to “run wild” and were “not at all interested in our great museums of art and history, in our magnificent churches and public libraries, our splendid parks and public monuments. They are interested in speakeasies and dance halls and return to their native heaths to slander New York” (Proceedings of the Board of Alderman 572). In their view, it was the city’s, and by extension the country’s, international reputation that was at stake. Here, “wildness” is, at least in part, code for sexual abandon and miscegenation—forms of sex that could not produce desirable, racially pure citizens. By citing seemingly more respectable and *representative* cultural institutions such as museums, churches, and libraries as American culture par excellence, jazz was exempted from the realm of American culture and black musicians were cast as foreigners. The allegedly inherent licentious quality of jazz was explicitly attributed to the influence of black diasporic cultural and religious forms. This notion of foreignness was further supported by music educator, writer, and national chairwoman of the music division of the Federation of Women’s Clubs Anne Shaw Faulkner Oberndorfer, who declared that “Jazz in its original form was used as the accompaniment to voodoo ceremonies. Is it any wonder that the largest industries which started community singing during war times have been forced to forbid the singing of jazz in any of their factories?” (Brunn 172)

The ostensibly race-blind provisions of anti-jazz laws were thus rooted in anti-black sentiment, in the belief that blacks were acultural, primitive, and unsuitable for civilization or citizenship proper. As Paul Chevigny argues, “The racist impulse to control the supposedly degrading abandon of black music was thus absorbed into a vaguer purpose, more acceptable to contemporary tastes, of shielding patrons from ‘undesirable’ influences” (59). By indicting jazz and the venues where jazz music is performed, the law obliquely targets black subjects and cultural production for discipline and exclusion, and frames the sounds they produce as pollutants that compromise the moral character of the city, and indeed, of the nation. Thus, the New York City of the interwar years in which Sonny-Rett, a fledgling black musician, is raised already possesses a climate of repression and sexual taboo surrounding jazz. Ulene’s unique moniker for jazz—“Sodom and Gomorrah music”—reflects aforementioned fears that already tenuous notions of white purity and supremacy could be both biologically compromised by miscegenation and artistically threatened by black musical innovation. The moralizing rhetoric and consequent aural discipline we see from Ulene is a product

of a standing national discourse about the crudeness of jazz that is fundamentally rooted in broader conceptions of black subjects as improper, acultural, polluting elements of the body politic.

In Paris, similar regulations surfaced, such as the “10 percent law,” a Parisian municipal law passed in 1922 in reaction to the influx and popularity of black American jazz musicians and jazz music in the city. In the interwar period, black American jazz musicians were highly favored above French jazz musicians, creating a booming demand for the former seemingly at the expense of the latter. The economic strain of the Depression in the 30s heightened tensions—black American jazz musicians were viewed as nomadic, opportunistic foreigners who were taking jobs away from white French musicians, who viewed themselves as true citizens who should be privileged for jobs. As a result, Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré passed the “10 percent law,” which “limited the number of foreign musicians employed by an establishment to 10 percent of the total number of French musicians employed there” (Shack 77). The discourse of foreignness here would later coincide with mounting xenophobia directed at black and brown immigrants from the French colonies. Prime Minister Jacques Chirac’s infamous complaint in 1991 about “le bruit et l’odeur” [the noise and the smell] of immigrants perhaps best illustrates how, through time, the preservation of a “pure” soundscape (devoid of “noise”) and the sustenance of an anti-black vision of national identity have appeared as strategically aligned projects.

Marshall offers a literary history of this legislation in *The Fisher King*. When Hattie is narrating the story of the decline of Sonny-Rett’s career in Paris to a packed audience at the Putnam Royal, she describes the cabaret laws that devastate Sonny-Rett’s prospects of success:

[T]he jazz scene in Europe...started to change around the mid-sixties, especially in France. There were suddenly all these new cabaret laws and rules on the books...There were to be no more all-black bands, for one. French musicians, nationals...were to be given preference when a club was hiring. The playing of non-French music on the radio was to be strictly limited. Another law. Non-French music meaning jazz, not Beethoven or Bach...For years the state radio in Paris had regularly played live jazz, commissioning prominent musicians like Sonny-Rett—who were considered almost French by then—to compose and arrange the music for the various studio bands. That too soon came to an end (Marshall 202).

Sonny-Rett’s career dramatically declines after the passage of the cabaret laws, and in spite of his former renown, he is no longer able to find work. Hattie explains to the audience: “Less and less of the kind of work he was used to came his way: the

regular bookings at the big, well-known clubs, the record dates, the concerts, the yearly festivals. Less of all that, including even the standard engagement at the Belle Epoque where his image hung out front” (Marshall 200). Sonny-Rett’s inability to find work at the venue where his visage is displayed is a powerful comment on the terms on which Sonny-Rett can be accepted in France: as a symbol that draws capital into the economy, he is welcome; as a subject who earns capital, shapes the music market, and enjoys the privileges of citizenship, he is unwelcome. He is only welcome as an object of fetish. Sonny-Rett’s conundrum—an agent whose productive capacity helps sustain the state economy, and yet does not secure for him the rights and protections of citizenship—echoes Michel Foucault’s description of the “docile body” produced by disciplinary regimes. He writes: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in terms of economic utility) and diminishes these same forces (in terms of political obedience) ...let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (138).

While relating the story of the decline of Sonny-Rett’s career, Hattie silently recalls the details of his death. Sonny-Rett, reduced to serving as a substitute pianist at a local bar, is stopped by the police on his way home from a gig. The police, as Hattie remembers, are “cracking down on the undocumented, the illegals, stopped him that Friday night in the Châtelet station” (Marshall 201). Again, the text shows here that anti-jazz legislation and anti-black racism coalesce upon a shared target of regulation: black subjects. When asked for his residency card, however, Sonny-Rett—who has his card in his wallet—refuses to present it. Instead, “he told them they could find it hanging above the entrance to a certain nightclub on rue Monge” (201). After attempting to walk away from the police, a chase ensues, and Sonny-Rett is killed after “either fall[ing] or jump[ing] down the long flight of concrete stairs, repeatedly striking his head on the way down” (Marshall 202).

Sonny-Rett’s attempt to claim belonging via jazz in the moments before his death, rather than the nation, acts as a final improvisatory act that marks him for the fatal aggression of the state. It is no mistake that Sonny-Rett dies in a subway station—just as he spends his life in transit between governing institutions, he ends his life in the same way: wandering, never quite finding a space where he is accepted, embraced, and permitted to live freely.

CONCLUSION

For Marshall, hearing is neither natural nor neutral. Instead, the (often moralistic) rhetoric that surrounds black music are engines of aural discipline: Ulene understands jazz only as “Sodom and Gomorrah” music because standing rhetorics in New York City in the early-to-mid twentieth century about sexual impropriety

and classed designations of musical inferiority and unsophistication are already available to shape her aural experiences. In the novel, jazz and jazz musicians are not stigmatized and targeted merely because of some inherent, unpleasant quality of the music itself—indeed, the danger of jazz is that it appears to be *too* attractive, enthralling, and visionary for patrons and performers. Aural discipline, then, is a way of containing the generative capacity of black music to sonically generate spaces of solidarity and envision worlds where black subjects are welcome and free.

Reading *The Fisher King* for the ways white supremacy moves to govern quotidian sensory experience, for the subtle machinations of a racist body of law, for the ways the extermination of black and brown subjects can be sanctioned through the rhetoric of policing national borders, and for the dangers of adopting a respectability politics where privilege is rewarded in exchange for apathy and disdain for working class black and brown people and anti-black xenophobia are especially salient considerations in the current political moment in the United States. The question of what vision of justice brings us closer to a world free from the interests of a white ruling elite—and whether we should pursue it through programs of gradual reform or radical revolution—are questions that bubble beneath the surface of *The Fisher King*. Ulene’s hopes that Sonny-Rett can leverage class privilege to protect him from the prejudice she faces as a black immigrant in the United States in the 1910s and 20s, and his rejection of a career as a classical musician seems to stymie his prospects in the United States. Ironically, however, his success as a jazz musician abroad grants him access to the capital, stability, and renown that she hopes for, but it doesn’t safeguard him from the aggression of the law and law enforcement officials. Marshall’s novel demonstrates through Sonny-Rett’s journey that, for black and brown subjects, accessing the promises of the American Dream in a world where white supremacy remains uncontested will not protect us from anti-black violence. Further, her work affirms that we cannot make meaningful strides in abolishing white supremacy without acknowledging the ways that it crosses national borders; it is a *global* program, and therefore must be analyzed through a black internationalist lens.

Marshall—whose novels demonstrate a consistent preoccupation with the power of black identity and community, and the sometimes-fatal barriers to positive self-identification for black subjects—is distinctive as an Afro-Caribbean writer who prioritizes broad, international black solidarity over national or regional affiliation. In many ways, she is ideologically aligned with many radical Afro-Caribbean women writers such as Erna Brodber, Michelle Cliff, and M. NourbeSe Philip whose works turn a critical eye to the range of oppressive conditions for people of color across disparate geographies, and positively embrace blackness as a tradition of resistance.¹¹ Reading Marshall today, then, reminds us that our

¹¹ See, for instance, M. NourbeSe Philip’s meditations on anti-blackness and the legacies of slavery in Canada, the Caribbean, U.S., and on the African continent across her works “Black

collective struggle against white supremacy and need for global black solidarity only becomes more urgent with the evolution of mechanisms of oppression that eschew the language of race and assume instead the discourses of security, propriety, and order. Sonny-Rett's death is a call to action, a reminder that these seemingly softer discourses have the power to become, and already are, deadly for people of color.

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W/Holes: A History of Brief Time," *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, and *Zong!* See Erna Brodber's vision of Afro-Caribbean and African-American solidarity in her novel *Louisiana* and her thoughts on global black solidarity in her *sx salon* interview with me, "Put Your Bucket Down: A Conversation with Erna Brodber". Finally, see Michelle Cliff's vision of Afro-Caribbean and African-American solidarity in struggle in her novel *Free Enterprise* and her meditations on shared mechanisms of global anti-blackness in the U.S., Caribbean, and Europe in her novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*.

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