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Water, Roads, and Mapping Diaspora Through Biomythography

Cover Page Acknowledgments

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“It was very early on that I had a sense of a very distinct difference between home, which had to do with the West Indies, and this country which had to do with the United States.”
-- Paule Marshall, MELUS Interview with Joyce Pettis

Paule Marshall’s 2009 memoir, *Triangular Road*, spans across New York, Jamestown, Barbados, Paris, Grenada, and Lagos—sites connected and separated by seas, rivers, and oceans. The same bodies of water that form the routes that chart the roots of African diaspora discourse become fixed in a singular route, a triangular road, in Marshall’s autobiographical work. The author’s note indicates that the book comes from a series of lectures based on bodies of water. In moving between the rootedness of land and the fluidity of water to paint her own artistic connections, Marshall reinforces Paul Gilroy’s theory that water is central to the formations and understandings of the African diaspora and its cultures (12-14). The moments she shares are unique to her experience, to her perspective, but they are also profoundly common as they draw upon the histories, fictions, and narratives of a diasporic blackness.

Since Audre Lorde’s 1982 *Zami*, literary scholars have used biomythography to explain and analyze the narratives of women of color and postcolonial storytelling practices. Biomythography melds nonfiction and myth, while placing a personal narrative amidst the many communities that person exists within. It challenges the lines between fiction and non-fiction while also questioning the singularity of an autobiography. Marshall’s 2009 memoir, *Triangular Road*, can be read as a biomythography in this way. The title is suggestive of the Triangular Trade that produced the Middle Passage. The chapter structure pays homage to Langston Hughes, literally and then through the use of his first published poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Marshall begins her memoir with her experiences traveling with Hughes, with each chapter titled after his famous poem. In using Hughes’s work as a structure, Marshall is able to bend time between his first works and her own. She puts her *Triangular Road* in conversation with his autobiographical work *Big Sea*. And by using Hughes’s poem as the basis for the chapter titles, their state visits together, and Hughes’s international profile, she calls upon an understanding of movement, recognition, misunderstanding, and negotiation that is at the heart of diasporic discourse. This article uses Marshall’s memoir to demonstrate how the practice of biomythography can further discourses of the African diaspora. How might the tensions between biography, autobiography, myth, and narrative explain community? How might myth meld

fiction and fact to form narrative truths? What role does myth play in the histories of migration, relation, and movement of African diasporic peoples?

DIASPORIC NARRATIVES

In *Triangular Road* Marshall gives readers a peek at how her own life story has served as the backdrop for her fiction, deftly charting her path as a woman and as a writer. She traces her relationship with Langston Hughes, focusing on their State Department funded tour of Europe in 1965; shares her 1998 Labor Day celebration with her friend Virginia; delves into her family history and the moments of her career that allowed her to further investigate it; and ends with her 1977 FESTAC visit to Lagos hinting at a Kenyan trip just a few years later. The memoir also displays the inspirations for Marshall's fiction, her process as a writer, and her longings as a person. It roots her in her family history in Barbados while paying careful attention to her relationship with a larger (black) world. As Agnieszka Łobodziec notes, "[h]er memoir also serves as an instrument of self-projection by way of which Marshall demarks the development of her literary artistry, and the significant role Bajan women's expressiveness played in the process" (55). In presenting snippets of her life story along with showing the behind the scenes makings of her fictional works, Marshall draws a direct connection between biography and fiction. Her memoir blurs these lines by willfully inventing family stories about her father while recounting the histories of her mother's family. It presents the personal historical accounts that become fictionalized in her novels and short stories.

Marshall's fiction begins before the African diaspora is "officially" named as such, but manages to exemplify the central issues involved in black populations moving, returning, identifying, and disclaiming one another across locations and time. Her work is haunted by slavery's legacies, at times explicitly celebrating its remembrance. Her fiction also refuses any happy, uniform sense of blackness (Jones 597). The fissures, fragments, and failures feature as part of the black worlds that she navigates and creates.

In his 1982 work "The African Diaspora: Concept and Context" George Shepperson concluded that "[t]he old African diasporists wanted to see Africans, at home and abroad, past and present, treated as human beings. I cannot believe that, at heart, the aim of the African diasporists of today is different" (52). Shepperson's work, in this article and elsewhere, traces the conceptual moves between different forms of Pan-Africanism, black internationalism, and why scholars arrived at the concept of the African diaspora. Ultimately, he argues that the African diaspora as

concept was necessary in order to continue the conversation of black humanity and black modernity in the midst of the heavy connotations and debates around Pan-Africanism that had begun to slow the conversation down by the 1960s. Generally, the term Pan-Africanism had different usages on and off the continent of Africa, and in specific movements and organizations such as the Pan-African congresses and conferences; but it was necessary to also keep in mind the less structured connections, migrations, and conversations that were happening across the black world.

As diasporic discourse grew, conversations in black studies, politics, and cultural studies abounded. British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's definition of articulation has been central to these discourses. Based in a Marxist discourse Hall's iteration of articulation highlights those mechanisms, those joints that both separate and connect, that allow the space for movement. It highlights difference within unity and the processes that create such space (33). Jennifer Daryl Slack elaborates when she writes "[a]rticulation is, then, not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections, much in the same way that hegemony is not domination but the process of creating and maintaining consensus or co-ordinating interests" (114). Brent Hayes Edwards has built upon this concept offering his own term to describe the complexity of black relations across difference—*décalage*. Using a not quite translatable French term, Edwards highlights the difference or gaps in time or in space that are central to diasporic discourses. He notes that such unevenness needs to be acknowledged rather than superficially evened out, and that the things that cannot be translated the misunderstandings are just as important as a sense of unity ("The Uses of Diaspora" 64-66).

A number of scholars have also cautioned to be careful and specific when employing the concept of the African diaspora. Paul Gilroy adopts the term in understanding a specific black British experience before putting it in conversation with a term he's more well known for, the black Atlantic (205-12). Tina Campt's work on Afro-German populations advises diaspora scholars against creating a singular uncomplicated narrative of diasporic belonging, one based in the transatlantic slave trade. In exploring the narratives of Afro-Germans and their tensions with diasporic relation, Campt shows the work that diaspora does and can do when it is understood that diasporic affiliation is not automatic and each subject, each population comes into the conversation on their own terms, with their own histories (111). Thus, African diaspora discourse has sought to name and highlight not just the humanity of black peoples in the modern world, but also the complexity of that humanity and the complexity of the relationships across black populations.

It seeks to make such complex humanity legible while also acknowledging that not every experience is translatable. Marshall's narratives echo others who are steadfast in representing black experiences and diasporic (be)longing honestly, with all of their complexity and conflict.

Marshall's novels illuminate a diasporic experience, presenting focused narratives that are examples of larger phenomena such as (neo)colonialism, migration, and class exploitation. Her short stories dot the landscape of her early career as both previews to the novels and flashbacks to life experiences. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* works through the issues of home and away, made fuzzy by immigration and the varying expectations and desires of interlocking communities. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* very deliberately critiques systems of colonialism, neocolonialism, and arguably white savior anthropologies during a historical moment of black nationalism and anti-colonialism. *Praisesong for the Widow* is even more explicit in its diasporic representations. Focusing on the Big Drum dances of Carriacou, the cultural remnants, connections, and conversations between West and Central Africa, the Caribbean, South Carolina, and New York allows Marshall to show the linkages of the black diasporic world. Her later novels *Daughters* and *The Fisher King* still deal with the power struggles of migration and return, gender dynamics, colonialism, and places them within family histories, national politics, and the rhythms of jazz. *Daughters* weaves postcolonial politics through narratives of motherhood, friendship, and heart-wrenching love stories. *The Fisher King* uses a chess game of family relations to bring its protagonist face to face with histories she had been running from. Facing them, seemingly on her own terms, she finds that her moves had been scripted and she loses just as she thought she had gained.

While *Praisesong for the Widow* has been noted as one of her most overtly diasporic texts, Marshall's oeuvre is full of characters and strategies that demonstrate her own diasporic engagements. In writing of Marshall's first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Gavin Jones notes that in "combining an examination of diasporic sea imagery and the racial dynamics of vision in *Brown Girl*, we can appreciate how Marshall exposes not so much the possibilities as the problems of establishing a unified black consciousness in a world riven by competing definitions of self" (597). Jones goes on to note the ways that "Marshall's novel proposes a wider, creolized, prismatic sense of identity which contains many different facets" (601). Such a multifaceted sense of identity is evident in Marshall's 1961 collection of short stories *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, which spans Barbados, Brooklyn, British Guiana, and Brazil. Each story focuses on a man who is coming to know himself anew, who must confront how blackness operates in his world, and

what this means for his understanding of self. As in many of Marshall's works, each man must confront blackness as part of larger systems of privilege and power; as part of their manhood, their class, their social status, their loneliness, and their complex humanity. This is a journey that is echoed differently in Marshall's narratives of her own father, a man who migrated, and sought to define himself within his family, his migrant American community, and Father Divine's mission; and who ultimately struggled to understand himself within the larger structures of his world.

In speaking of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* Marshall says, "My sense of what I wanted to do, of course, was to have a kind of vehicle that looked at the relationship of the West to the rest of us" (Pettis and Marshall 123). The novel's focus on a small local space and its encounter with larger global phenomena such as capitalism, tourism, eroticism, and commercialism, is an example of diasporic experiences with Western globalization discourses that trace back to the conquering empires of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In using Bournehills' stubborn connection to history it connects these phenomena to the Western modernity that was predicated largely on Caribbean resources, Caribbean labor, and the transatlantic slave trade. The novel shows how these phenomena define, recognize, and proscribe humanity in the modern world. And it connects these global phenomena to the growing international anti-colonialist and black nationalist movements of the 1969 moment the novel was released. The characters of *The Chosen Place* serve as a road map for how to envision the personal, political, and communal experiences of diaspora.

Merle, perhaps the most prominent of the local characters in the text, a black woman who holds an enigmatic reputation in Bournehills, embodies an intersectional collision with systems of power. As a character, Merle bursts beyond the novel and into her own novella published in *Reena and Other Stories*. Her command of authority in the community, her international experiences, and her refusal to fit dominant Western hegemonic notions of motherhood, womanhood, village life, religiosity, etc. serve to present the possibilities and difficulties of one black woman's subjectivity. In speaking of the reception of this protagonist, Marshall notes how one critic "called her part saint, part obeah women, part revolutionary. That really sums her up. What she is symbolically is the black man/woman of the Diaspora" (Pettis and Marshall 125). Merle embodies Marshall's gendered, classed, sexualized, educated understanding of local and diasporic relations.

In explaining why Merle is so dear to her, Marshall goes on to note, "[o]n a personal level, she's still trying to come to terms with her life and history as a black

woman, still seeking to reconcile all the conflicting elements to form a viable self...She's the most passionate and political of my heroines. A Third World revolutionary spirit" (Marshall, *Reena and Other Stories* 109). In using Merle to hint at the personal elements, the personal histories that are made possible through larger global phenomena, Marshall develops a technique of narrative. Poet and cultural theorist Kamau Brathwaite notes that in *The Chosen Place* "[this] technique in itself reflects the whole point of the novel; that we are creatures of our history, that the past predicts our present and that the present is, in the end, what we call home" (237). Writing history through fiction is one way to fix it in language, while not fixing its meaning. In the personal fictional histories that Marshall presents, the reader can discern a distinct longing for, claiming of, and building of home. Marshall does this in spite of and through troubling pasts, with the pressures of local communities and much larger contexts; this is the work of diasporic belonging.

Marshall's memoir does similar work as her fiction. Her personal story is important because it both proves and disproves prominent notions of diasporic belonging. Marshall's story does this through her understanding of the people who have been most central to her, the shoulders that she stands on. Her Barbadian grandmother, M' Da-duh, is the black woman matriarch, the U.S.'s Big Momma, the African Queen Mother, and yet even M' Da-duh's own daughters defy her (after all other family members have safely followed the plan). In both Marshall's fiction and the memoir, her father becomes the enigmatic man of dreams. He is saga boy charmer (Rohlehr 334), (over)confident everyman, devout religious follower, mysterious man without a history (and possibly a name), and ultimately he disappears. Marshall's mother, Adriana, embodies the image of the young Barbadian woman with a plan who grows to be the migrant mother shielding her children from her own mistakes and shielding her pain from the world. They each have definitive roles to play in Paule Marshall's life story, a story that is told in moments throughout her memoir and further fragmented beyond factual occurrences in her fiction. In Marshall's multiple narratives the reader is introduced to diasporic scripts of uplift through migration, ones that have just as much a chance of failing as succeeding. These scripts are not simple. They don't aim to be overarching. The stories they belong to create a fictional world that holds multiple mirrors to reality.

Paule Marshall doesn't fit. She's audacious enough to become Paule, discarding her second given name Pauline (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 80). She's an artist in the midst of a suffocating Barbadian-American business-oriented society. She's married, but it is far from a "traditional" union. She's a mother, but

this label isn't the whole of her womanly existence. Like many children of immigrants, she's American born and not quite American, West Indian rooted, but not quite Barbadian. She sees herself in the struggles of 1960s Black America, but her work didn't translate easily into the militancy of the era. And she begins her memoir with this paradox. As Łobodziec notes, "Marshall depicts herself as a politically conscious black American novelist coerced to confront the white dominated power structure, personified by a blond-haired, blue-eyed female official of The United States Department of State" (52). In her official invitation to tour Europe with Langston Hughes she is able to access the international, speak of American injustice, and learn of Afro-European communities through the same State Department that she denounces. It is in her *not* fitting that she tells a specific story of diaspora. Her life experiences embody the fragmentation associated with West Indian/Caribbean identity. It exemplifies the displacement at the root of classic definitions of diaspora. And her story is rooted in the sea, in the waters that both separate and give passage across different destinations. The relationship between Marshall's fiction and her memoir extends through these themes.

In centering the text on the Caribbean (by placing "I've Known Seas," the longest chapter by far, at the center of the text) Marshall posits the Caribbean as a central imaginary for diasporic inquiry, and for her own identity. Not only were the islands central to her identity, but also to her writing technique. Marshall says, "because the islands were small, they permitted me to deal with a manageable landscape. I could use that to say what I wanted to about the larger landscapes" (Pettis and Marshall 119). Her literary choices demonstrate the work that such narratives do. All of the sea baths that "had the power to heal whatever ailed you" (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 102), the James River's memories of auction blocks, "the green flash" of Grenada's Grand Anse beach, it all builds bridges between ancient and everlasting physical tangible phenomenon and the temporary and fleeting experiences that such spaces bear witness to; between her own personal narrative and those that precede and will outlast her; between moving, fluid bodies of water and fixed spaces of land; between the realities and the imaginaries of islands. Marshall's narrative illustrates what Caribbean writer Derek Walcott means when he says,

There is a territory wider than this—wider than the limits made up by the map of an island—which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers. All of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog. Pieces of sunlight through the fog and sudden rainbows, *arcs-en-ciel*. That is the effort, the labor of the Antillean imagination, rebuilding its gods from bamboo frames, phrase by phrase. (32)

And it is in this work that the Caribbean does that one can see how important imaginaries are to narratives in general and to narratives of the African diaspora more specifically.

Throughout her memoir Marshall notes the ways in which imaginaries affect people's perspectives of their worlds. In speaking of her time in Barbados she notes how her group of friends were the professionals who had studied abroad in London, and how every last one of them came back to Barbados radicalized. They spoke of anti-colonialism and Ghana's 1957 independence. She envied them because, in her experience, black Americans didn't dream in this way. But she is careful to critique these new dreams as well, noting "it would be another nine years later, in 1966, before [Barbados] finally achieved independence. And even then the old colonial imprimatur—economically, culturally, socially—would remain intact for some time" (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 103). Marshall demonstrates the ways in which travel and privilege created new imaginaries, but also notes the limits of those dreams once realized.

Not unlike her favorite protagonist Merle, Marshall shows how the imaginaries of black independence and diasporic crossing affected her own sense of self and her understanding of herself as a diasporic subject. In the last pages of her memoir she writes:

After all, my life, as I saw it, was a thing divided in three: There was Brooklyn, U.S.A., and specifically the tight, little, ingrown immigrant world of Bajan Brooklyn that I had fled. Then, once I started writing, the Caribbean and its conga line of islands had been home off and on for any number of years. While all the time, lying in wait across the Atlantic, in a direct line almost with tiny wallflower Barbados, had been the Gulf of Guinea and the colossus of ancestral Africa, the greater portion of my tripartite self that I had yet to discover, yet to know. (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 163)

Marshall's sense of self is fragmented in ways that allow for growth. Her personal story spans across time and space intersecting with other narratives. She exercises her own agency, fleeing when necessary, and finds temporary home in an already fragmented Caribbean Sea. Her story reaches back to ancestral Africa, but also exists in her own future self. In ending her memoir in this way, Marshall shows how her personal narrative is also one of creation; it undergirds and inspires her fiction. In *Triangular Road* she shows the ways in which, fiction or non-fiction, "an honest story is an accurate story" (Bascomb 64).

MYTHIC SEAS, FRAGMENTED REFLECTIONS

Roland Barthes defines myth as “a type of speech... a system of communication ... a mode of signification, a form” (93). This form can rework, distort, and sometimes repurpose the meaning it is meant to convey. In Barthes formulation “mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (94). Myth must be founded in history, but as a second tier semiological system, myth’s history takes non-direct routes.

Myth is also a form through which History itself can be questioned. The Western hegemonic definitions of “official” and “accurate” histories are often exclusionary and incomplete. In defining the History of Man many populations, cultures, and civilizations have been written out of both the dominant definitions of “History” and “(Hu)Man” (Gilroy 42). Because myth is a two-tiered system of representation it has a “double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us” (Barthes 102). Like a broken mirror, myth is a form through which to see both the official “History” and, through reflecting and representing via multiple angles and broken panes, it shows many of the histories and peoples that were invisible in a big singular looking glass. Myth as a form, then, can fragment in order to present different, sometimes greater, wholes.

Walcott argues that such fragmentation is the basis of Caribbean identity. In his 1992 Nobel Prize speech he says “[t]hat is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong” (28). The histories of indigenous peoples, enslaved and indentured laborers, and migrants are shattered by the oceans that they crossed to reach the Caribbean where, fragmented, they become another experience entirely. The fragmentation paradoxically generates strength, makes for a wholeness whose story is told in and through the imaginary of the Caribbean Sea. Walcott continues: “I mean the Caribbean Sea, whose smell is the smell of refreshing possibility as well as survival. Survival is the triumph of stubbornness, and spiritual stubbornness, a sublime stupidity, is what makes the occupation of poetry endure, when there are so many things that should make it futile” (30). Barthes argues that contemporary poetry operates in the reverse of myth, but what about contemporary poetry that draws on “classical” poetic language?¹ Walcott’s poetry, his chosen form of language, is one way to represent larger imaginaries of survival, possibility, and a Caribbean identity. Walcott has used an imposed form, borrowed from imposed traditions, and

¹ Barthes argues that “classical” poetry is very mythical because as a form it is so regular.

reworked them in order to represent specific experiences. His work, and his comments on his work, show the ways that “the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*” (105). The same forms (of language, of modernity, of History) that have served to silence colonized populations, can be repurposed through myth to tell their stories.

Myth, then, might serve a similar function as the seas and oceans that such populations crossed. The sea is tangible, it exists in the physical world, with a host of ecosystems, worlds, and imaginaries within it. But seas are also a means of movement. They exist as pathways. Their form is constantly changing, constantly becoming, always present, but never static. Such movement is sustaining; it provides constant possibility, a means of survival, and a way of remaining the same through a continual remaking. While many literary critics have focused on the brownstone architecture of Marshall’s first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (see Benston 1975; Dickerson 1991; Francis 2000), for Gavin Jones the sea features more prominently. He posits that in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* “[t]he sea has a thematic inclusiveness, a flexibility and fluidity; upon it float diverse ideas of difference” (598). Myth might move knowledge in this same way. Perhaps Barthes is not so much wrong to believe that “myth is always a language-robbery” (118), but perhaps for those who have been told that they have no language, no history, no modernity/civilization, myth can simultaneously become a language reclamation. The sea, as metaphor and mythic home, contains these possibilities. Just as the sea doesn’t rob the sky its rain, just as it isn’t false when it butts up against the shore any more than when it whips itself into a wave, myth can reclaim the forms through which one can speak. Myth can translate History into histories, and thus it is a form that can question the limits of knowledge—how one knows and how one can know.

This is the kind of narrative that Marshall presents in *Triangular Road*. Fractured into moments, reflecting into wholeness, the memoir builds on the knowledge that only Paule Marshall possesses (her life story) in order to present a mythic narrative of diasporic belonging. Brathwaite notes that “[i]t is in this painful, personal context that Paule Marshall offers and affirms her perception of the meaning of West Indian identity” (238). While he writes this of her fiction, the same is true of her memoir. In *Triangular Road* Marshall presents her tri-partite identity, rooted in the West Indies, but branching out much further across space and time as fragmented toward wholeness (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 163). In relaying her experiences across time across space she presents a “territory of the soul” one that is both material and imagined (Ellis 3).

One of the main imaginaries of the African diaspora is the Black Atlantic, that body that birthed and killed, created and destroyed, multiple identities

producing an international blackness rooted in connection, dispersal, loss, and remembering. While the Caribbean finds itself at the heart of global modernity, a moving foundation for the labor, resources, and processes of the modern world, its fragments are further reflected within the Atlantic Ocean (Benítez-Rojo 3-5). It is the crossing of the Atlantic that makes Caribbean fragmentation productive. Just as Walcott sees the Caribbean Sea as a site of possibility, Jacqui Alexander finds the act of crossing just as full of promise. She writes “[t]he Crossing is also meant to evoke/invoke the crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary. It is that imaginary from which we dream the craft of a new compass” (8). Her aim is to think about pedagogies broadly—all the ways in which we come to know—with a foundation in the crossings of the transatlantic slave trade. The movement of bodies, histories, ideas, and meanings is where she finds the promise of knowledge of self amidst larger worlds.

It is in these crossings of the fifteenth, nineteenth, and now twenty-first centuries that what Barthes calls language robbery becomes narrative creation. Myth is necessary in the histories of those whose voices are left out of the “official” record.² This is the form of narrative that Marshall offers in *Triangular Road*. As she stands on the banks of the James River in Virginia thinking about the peoples who were auctioned off not far away she re-members a history, she reconstructs the fragments of History into a related history. She relies on her imagination and historical “fact,” and in the pages of her memoir creates a mythical history to bring those people back into view. In this she shows how she values these peoples in the same way that Derek Walcott writes: “[b]reak a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole” (28). In reconnecting histories through her own reflection in the pages of her memoir she rewrites the History/histories of those people whom she knows many have already forgotten. As myth, Marshall’s account of the James River’s history shifts focus because, as Barthes notes, “what is invested in the concept [of myth] is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept” (105). Marshall has knowledge of the history that she presents, but the form that her retelling takes (a written memoir placing her in the same spot thinking back to a time before herself) shifts focus from the specifics of

² While Marable sees myth as something oppressed peoples use to “feel better” in his call for new approaches to history, this article seeks to show that myth has the potential to recast historical narrative, and that such recasting might just achieve the kind of truth that Marable and others seek. (2005)

each person that crossed at the James River, the details of each movement, to the matter that they were there, to the concept of their presence and the conditions and systems that made it so. This is one tool of reclamation for those histories, those narratives that were lost in official archives. If one cannot know the names of those men and women who crossed at the James River, if one cannot know their thoughts, at least in her memoir, Paule Marshall is able to reframe their existence. She echoes their silence with her own narrative musings on it, and reconstructs them anew.

Mythical forms, then, along with all other fictions, can serve to illuminate, reshape, and ultimately present varying perspectives of history, and varying perspectives of reality. Myth is at its most potent when challenging dominant notions. While myth can be set into stereotype, can be fixed to the point of becoming a dubious “fact,” as a form it also has the potential to humanize and validate peoples who have been and continue to be written out of the human family. It can do the same work that those who began using the term “African diaspora” sought to do (Shepperson 52). If, as Saidiya Hartman notes in her article “Venus in Two Acts,” “History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror” (9), myth might be a complement to the methodologies of reclamation that she suggests. As she seeks to find answers for all of the Black Venuses whose names and specific experiences have been erased in the archive, myth may be the kind of narrative restraint she seeks, one that does not erase meaning, that does not erase the first system of signification, but builds upon it to create something else.

Hartman asks “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?” (3). Reclaiming and validating alternative voices, alternative knowledges, and alternative ways of knowing is the work of diaspora. Understanding the differences, the similarities, the *décalage* of fragmented wholes requires a different form of narration. Jacqui Alexander implores that “[a]uthenticating a voice comes through the rediscovery of the underbelly, literally unearthing and piecing together the fragmented members of existence” (279). Doing so requires re-membling. It necessitates a second (and third and fourth and...) look at how black bodies, black spaces, and black lives move through and against the global processes that define modern humanity and dehumanize in the process (Gilroy 5). Sharon Holland’s reading of Barthes’s understanding of black biography is telling here. She writes that “[o]n so many levels, Barthes is right about the work of racialization—the racialized body has to become form and therefore fiction to be comprehended, written about, written on” (1497), but she also thoroughly questions this conclusion. In thinking about why Barthes might be right she looks at how biography is meant to tell human stories

and how the process of racialization writes blackness out of humanity. In rethinking how myth functions, in founding it in different histories than Barthes did, the form of myth, then, might be one way for racialized subjects to bridge History and history, fiction and valued fact, personal and collective narrative, and home and away.

BIOMYTHOGRAPHY: COMMUNITY NARRATIVES, COLLECTING HOME

‘Never let what really happened get in the way of truth,’
a sage, somewhere, is known to have said.
-- Paule Marshall, *Triangular Road*

In 1982 black woman warrior poet Audre Lorde published *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In the text she traced her life’s story through her Grenadian heritage, her Harlem upbringing, life in Stamford, and a voyage to Mexico, ultimately presenting her readers with the narrative of how she came to know herself. Each event, each trauma, each celebration in the text serves to connect Audre Lorde to the many different sides of herself arriving at a new identity: *Zami*. As Anh Hua notes, “*Zami* is not simply an autobiography but a biomythography, in which myth and fiction function to frame past, present, and future selves” (114). Lorde’s use of this term (as a descriptive sub-subtitle listed on the cover) gave name to a phenomena that was not uncommon in women of color’s biographical literature (see Gillan 1996; Scafe 2013; Weekes 2006). Telling the story of one life, or even one moment as in memoir, entails painting the interactions with others around them. And sometimes when the communities that are the subject of the story don’t fit into dominant literary narratives, it becomes imperative for an author to find a way to be honest beyond accuracy. Maria Pilar Sánchez Calle notes that “[f]or Lorde, *biomythography* is a method of self-exploration and not limited to a genre whose validity depends on the authenticity of the content of the narration” (163). *Zami* is Lorde’s story to tell. And as such she takes license to embellish, rewrite, and fragment the tale in such a way as to make it more whole from her perspective. Doing so allows her to rename herself, and to show the many sides of her own complexity and the complex humanity of the communities around her. Readers are notified of this with the inclusion of “biomythography” on the cover of the text, since “[t]he word *biomythography* also announces the plurality of the textual self and of the narrative voices to be found in this work” (163).

Jennifer Gillan notes the ways in which *Zami* follows a tradition of women's biographical writing and the ways in which biomythography often searches and writes into being a sense of home. In analyzing "journeywoman" narratives such as *Zami* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gillan notices the similarities in form and content. She says that each of these biomythographies "is part autobiography, poetry, revisionary history, and narrative which switches between locations and languages, often recalling Linda Lorde's [Audre Lorde's mother's] sensual language of home" (211). This theme of home, and more specifically searching for and naming home across place, is one way to understand how biomythography serves as a productive fragmentation of identity. Gillan goes on to say as "[a]n elongated poetic metaphor of what Caren Kaplan had called deterritorialized identity, the biomythography tells the story of a self constantly in the process of becoming, of a home which can be relocated at particular historical moments to meet particular needs" (211). Paule Marshall's memoir *Triangular Road* continues this tradition. Biomythography is a way of renaming oneself, of self-actualization, of becoming human and legend in the telling of one's story (Weekes 2006). Audre Lorde becomes *Zami*. Valenza Pauline Burke becomes Paule Marshall. And each, in telling the specifics of their personal stories, places herself within a new history and a broader community.

Biomythography, as a form, illumines the multiple subjectivities of the subject, blurs the lines between individual and community, and provides the space for possibility, the space to reimagine the subject and her/his communities in alternative spaces, times, and from different perspectives. In considering Lorde's use of the term, Calle offers that "[t]o consider *Zami* only as autobiography would be insufficient, so Lorde invents a wider and novel term, *biomythography*, in order to suggest and express her rich subjectivity" (163). All of Lorde, or even just all of what she would like to express in one volume, cannot quite fit into the form of an autobiography. Her story is much bigger than herself. She needed something else. Her use of biomythography also situates her story beyond the limits that *autobiography* implies. As Gillan notes, "[b]y inserting the term myth within the established generic category 'biography,' she refuses to simply narrate an account of one individual, and instead creates a collective vision through which to articulate the nuances of her personal history. Using this multi-generic format, Lorde tells a collective history of the women who have influenced her" (211).³ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman see this form as a means of liberation, as containing a

³ While many scholars consider biomythography in terms of women's writing, Wesley Crichtlow uses it in this same way to delineate his own narrative as part of various communities. See "History, (Re)Memory." (2004)

liberatory ethic. Biomythography needs multiple narratives in order to be complete, and thus regardless of the status or social location of these supporting narratives, they become a necessary part of understanding the individual. The form of biomythography then, is how an individual narrative can find meaning in and through the multiple lives, experiences, and perhaps most importantly, communities that have shaped the subject (Floyd-Thomas and Gillman 185).

If looking to tell community stories, why, then, focus on an individual narrative? In analyzing the work of Caribbean women writers, Suzanne Scafe argues for the importance of autobiography. She writes “the work’s autobiographical identity matters because the works’ self-representation speaks of the presence of lived lives, revealing subjectivities that are commonly occluded from history” (203). Biography struggles to achieve this in its most traditional forms, as “biography is the narrative written by another that assumes it entitles the scribe to know something about the subject” (Holland 1497). Black subjects, women subjects, many subjects have historically been illegible to the dominant structures that validate modern humanity. How, then, could biographies of them exist? Sharon Holland asserts that perhaps they cannot within “traditional” literary structure. She notes,

In this Barthesian world, the individual and the community take on a special resonance in the presence of blackness; writing the individual’s biography in a community is impossible because the narrative we would recall to write such a story is missing a proper ordering—we cannot resolve the question of the Negro/(hu)man to record that life. This subject has no community or individuality—it is like the quintessential floating rib, a by-product of natural selection and biblical genesis. (1497)

As a floating signifier within sign systems of modernity “the Negro” is an inappropriate subject for biography. Barthes writes that “[o]ne must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified” (103). But rather than put the biography of the “Negro” in parentheses, biomythography fragments it in order to recast the image, in order to create a new sign. In marrying the authoritative seemingly “authentic” forms of biography and autobiography with myth, biomythographers tell a truth that can’t be told in conventional ways, simply because “traditional” literary audiences wouldn’t believe it anyway.

Much of Paule Marshall's work relies on her own biography. As she noted in "From the Poets in the Kitchen," it was the women whose language she heard in the brownstones of Brooklyn who shaped both her worldview and her use of language. In her 1994 Sir Walter Scott lecture she brings these women with her, she brings them home, to share in the honor of delivering a lecture commissioned by an independent Barbadian government.⁴ She does this in order to illustrate that for those "Mother Poets," "Language—both the spoken and the written word—was the means by which they maintained the connection with home" (Marshall, "Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad" 15). The content of their conversations (FDR, Garvey, their husbands, Barbados, the women they worked for) and their style of talk, the specifically Barbadian language dotted with expressions from other islands, retentions from West Africa, and tidbits from the U.S, all crossed the waters with them and served to connect them to their communities. Marshall quotes the Polish Noble Laureate Czeslaw Milosz when she echoes that "[l]anguage is the only homeland," and that "[t]he same could be said for the Mother Poets. They too found a haven, a homeland in the poetic vernacular they had brought with them from their beloved island" (Marshall, "Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad" 19). In bringing her Mother Poets back to the island that birthed them, back to the site of their language, Marshall understands that her views on their importance stem from the lessons they taught her. In their talk of Marcus Garvey's movement, of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, of the World Wars she knew that "[b]ecause of them, I could never view the concept of self-liberation and personal empowerment apart from the larger liberation and empowerment of the group, community and nation" (Marshall, "Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad" 24). Fifteen years later Paule Marshall's language again crosses space and time to bring these women, and a host of others in her life, home. Read as a biomythography, *Triangular Road* creates spaces for these crossings. The language of her memoir carries these voices, along with those of her son, her friends, and her audience, not just to Barbados, but to Grenada, to Paris, to Lagos, to Kenya taking a journey that connects these various homes in the language and experiences she shares.

Paule Marshall, like many fiction writers, came to understand the relationship between the accuracy of research and the importance of fictional license. In *Triangular Road* she details the intense writing block she experienced in sitting to write her second novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. On a well-funded fellowship she poured over the stacks of steno pads that contained her research notes, all of the history, all of the details that would be the foundation of the novel—and it paralyzed her. She says that it was in

⁴ The Sir Walter Scott lecture is a part of Barbadian independence celebrations. Marshall delivered her lecture in November of 1994 and it was published in 1995.

finally understanding, fledgling that I still was, that as a fiction writer, a novelist, a storyteller, a fabulist, as it were, my responsibility first and foremost was to the story, the story above all else: the old verities of people, plot and place; a story that if honestly told and well crafted would resonate with the historical truths contained in the steno pads. All of it would be there for those capable of reading in depth. (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 148).

This relationship between truth and honesty, between responsibility and accuracy extends to the memoir itself. Marshall willfully invents a history for herself. In filling in the absence of details about her father she constructs myths that serve her. She creates imagined connections in order to place the man she knew and her relationship with him into a history on the island of Barbados. This is one of the ways that biomythography, as a personal fictional truth shared publicly, is a tool, a form that can help individuals and collectives to find and create a sense of home.

What happens when the form of biomythography is considered as a metaphor of diaspora? The narrative of a complex self as part of a fragmented community, a narrative that more often than not crosses place and time, one whose fragmented elements allow for a fuller picture, does precisely the work that African diaspora theorists have been doing. George Shepperson's plea to present a full humanity is highlighted in narratives such as *Zami* and *Triangular Road* (52). Brent Hayes Edwards's *décalage* and Stuart Hall's articulation are enacted as it is the crossing between sites, between times, between selves in biomythographical narratives, it is the space to cross that makes them productive. Tina Campt's (2002) skepticism of any overarching or automatic sense of diasporic belonging echoes in Lorde's struggles to belong and Marshall's negotiations of American and class privilege. Marshall attests her own international and community leanings to the stories of the women in her life. In their support of Garvey and his movement she concludes "their support of that dream suggests, I believe, their strong identification with the Motherland and peoples of colour all over the world. This was to have a profound effect on the way I would treat the concept of community in my work later on" (Marshall, "Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad" 14). Her concept of community, as seen in all of her writing, does not presuppose any sense of universal belonging. The rifts, the disjunctions, all exist. There is work to fitting in. There is work behind forging collective efforts. And this work is something that exists on both the personal and political levels. Marshall says, "I consider this aspect of my writing, this combining of the personal with the political

and historical as the most significant feature of my work” (Marshall, “Language is the Only Homeland: Bajan Poets Abroad” 24).

For Lorde it is her estrangement from one community that brings her closer to another. As she notices her differences from one group she (re)establishes connections with others, moving in and between lesbian communities, black communities, black dyke communities, and outsiders (Gillan 215). Much of this happens through her mother and her mother’s legacy. In learning of her mother’s past, home becomes a far-away place and a sense of belonging yet to be achieved producing both nostalgia and longing. Anh Hua looks at this phenomenon as homeland memory and notes that for Lorde “homeland memory is evoked and imagined through her mother’s storytelling” (122). One of the more famous scenes of the text and perhaps the one most connecting Audre Lorde and her mother is the mortar and pestle scene (71-80). Here her language, the customs of cooking, and longing all point toward that mythical distant home situated by the stories she had heard in the New York home she is present within. As a site of knowing, or understanding and conflict “[t]he scene makes clear that there is movement, desire, and dislocation already within home and that home is both a site of possibilities and constraints” (Bolaki 788). Lorde is both alienated and at home here and, as Calle goes on to note, those themes often go together. She writes, “Each new home brings about a new feeling of alienation, and in each, either the sense of belonging or the feeling of alienation will prevail” (166). For both Lorde and Marshall these themes of finding and creating home out of alienation are recurring and drive their texts. They are able to write themselves home. As each “narration progresses, this home ceases to be associated [with] a geographic location in order to become a metaphorical space or a utopian place where the limitations imposed by race and gender have been overcome” (162).

This kind of literary identification is where the discourse of the African diaspora began. Black internationalism worked in and through the politics and literature (as well as other cultural forms, most notably music) that crossed black worlds. From the Harlem Renaissance to négritude, through Pan-African congresses and conferences, to journals and newspapers like *The Negro World* and *Presence Africaine*, and black presses’ coverage of anti-racist and anti-colonial movements, literary traditions have been one way for black populations to build connections, to find and create communities across difference. In *Triangular Road* “Marshall acknowledges the contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and the Civil Rights Movement to the struggle for racial equality in America along with the Caribbean Bussa’s rebellion and activist Nanny Griggs’ struggles against Caribbean slavery” (Łobodziec 54). Her engagement with this diasporic history in the memoir is not unlike that of her fiction. In *Praisesong for the Widow* the protagonist Avey envisions a series of threads. Gillan reads these threads as similar

to “Lorde’s intergenerational imagery. The threads link a ‘strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the “I” moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed’ (7). In *Zami*, Lorde weaves a connection from her own grandmother, Ma-Liz to the Dahomean female-male sky goddess-god principle, Mawulisa, in order to rejoin the strands of her own cultural heritage” (1996, 2013). In each text Marshall and Lorde use a personal narrative, both history and myth, to almost literally thread together a wider notion of belonging.

SEEDS BLOWING IN THE WIND

Paule Marshall’s memoir *Triangular Road* is one of many seeds blowing in the winds of diasporic literature. The path of this one spore is what allows the wind to be seen. The specific flight it takes, the form of biomythography, enables one to see how each spore interacts, meets, and is repulsed within the multiple waves of movement that make up diaspora discourses. Marshall’s language and her content presents a “self” reflected in a complicated web of relationships between colleagues, friends, family, and diasporic populations. As Jones writes in his analysis of *Brown Girl* “Marshall’s idea of the self as a many-sided crystal or prism recalls the ‘prism’ of languages described by Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite in the creolized societies of the Caribbean that develops from the unity of many different cultural vernaculars” (603). Strongly connected to the Caribbean as a mythic home, Marshall’s depictions of blackness throughout both her fictional and non-fiction works mirror the trajectories of African diaspora studies. Her 1959 “novel is a radical expression of how the black self, when it exists at the intersections of ethnicity, nationhood, and gender, has its wholeness challenged by alternative and frequently conflicting definitions” (604). In the time since this publication “the African diaspora” has been named, it has been tied to notions of collective unity (and at times unfortunate urges toward uniformity), it has been critiqued, before, in the twenty-first century especially, branching out to include and highlight difference as much as sameness.

Marshall describes her mother’s experience in the U.S. as one of triple invisibility, drawing on Ralph Ellison’s work. Both Marshall and Ellison have been critiqued in their engagements with and representations of blackness. For some of their critics their work and their personal stances were not radically political enough. As Evelyn Hawthorne notes, however, “[I]ike Ellison, Marshall is ‘political’—in the sense that she insists on a perspective of observation that is critical, and is ever aware of the political dimension of the social material” (4).

While the two are similar in this regard, *Triangular Road* presents all the ways in which Marshall was much more overt in her political critiques internationally, and artistically claimed connections to African peoples and continents that Ellison preferred to deny. Such connections, such practices are what color her mother's experience. The differences (her womanhood, her blackness, her foreignness) are what made her invisible. Both Marshall's fiction and non-fiction seeks to give voice to those who are similarly overlooked. Saidiya Hartman writes that "[t]he loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed" (8). Marshall's work refuses to do this, and yet at the same time does it very well. In her fiction, but moreso in her memoir, she fills the gaps with movement, with possibility, giving each narrative a sense of fragmented wholeness and space to grow. Her goal is as much about her audience as it is the content of her writing; often they are one and the same. She says,

To really depict ourselves, portray ourselves as we truly are. To offer not so much the world, but ourselves (and by that I mean the black community) a more truthful and in-depth and complex sense of who we are in all our diversity. I think that is one of the most wonderful things that has come out of this small proliferation of black women writers. ... This is something that motivates and guides my work, the sense that you can portray black women in a black community as it truly is, that you do a great service to that community, because once you see yourself as you really are, and that doesn't mean a glorification, but with our failings and our strength, that you begin to have a sense of your right to be in the world. (Pettis and Marshall 129)

In this way Paule Marshall's inventions of history, her mythical narratives, and her biomythographical memoir all use myth to present an honest truth. It is not necessarily a means of "feeling good" (as Manning Marable might say), but it is a means of validation.

Like the triangular road of the title Marshall ends her memoir with a return to her travels and their impact on her sense of self; it is a return without repetition. She brings the narrative to a close by describing another state sponsored visit abroad (this time to Kenya), ending in a different time in a different space, sponsored by a different state, but at the same point. This is the story of Antonio Benítez-Rojo's

repeating island (1996). Marshall is always an island within a larger population belonging in the various seas of blackness that she moves through, but both connected and isolated through the boundaries of difference. Her story repeats itself in Brooklyn, in Virginia, in Barbados, in Grenada, in Paris, in Lagos. It is built on the stories of her parents and the multitude of migrants who built community and struggled to find a place within it. It is echoed in the searchings for “the greater portion of [her] tripartite self that [she] had yet to discover, yet to know” (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 163).

The cultural discourses of African diaspora studies and black literature create cycles of understanding that can be seen in the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the James River. Marshall takes echoes of the 1600s to produce these cycles in a twenty-first century narrative that moves through the 1950s, the 1990s, and the 1970s. And such understandings appear in her narrative through crossings of place and the yearning to cross space and time. Jacqui Alexander notes that “[c]rossings are never undertaken all at once, and never once and for all” (290). In the first chapter of *Triangular Road* Marshall replays one of few moments when Langston Hughes was visibly upset, and more importantly, his message in that moment: that revolutions, racial struggles did not begin with his generation and would not end with hers (Marshall 22). Biomythographer and warrior poet Audre Lorde has echoed this in stating that revolution is not a one time event (141). Alexander also notes that “no one comes to consciousness alone, in isolation, only for herself, or passively” (283). Hughes, Lorde, Marshall, and to some extent, Alexander, all offer their personal histories as a means of understanding larger communities and even larger phenomena. Their stories cross continents, islands, and centuries. And it is in the telling of their stories that they take on new forms of signification.

In the movement of *Triangular Road*, Paule Marshall posits that perhaps it is the motion, the cyclical returns, that matter just as much as a desired destination of justice, belonging, equity, or home. This same sense of understanding the destination and the journey, the what and the way, informs narratological literary criticism (Prince 527). Using such literary methods in a larger discourse of understanding not just literature, but the lived experiences that literature attempts to capture, and the fragments, silences, and absences that cannot be captured is one means through which diaspora discourse has grown and continues to grow. The field returns anew to the basic foundations of black humanity through forms that express distinct narratives of blackness.

So perhaps biomythography allows one to fill in the holes in different ways, to be comfortable in the fragments, to use those gaps to move rather than stay fixed

in unreachable (and perhaps now undesirable) ideals. The form of these narratives invites its readers to engage in the *décalage* of diasporic discourse, and to settle into the movement, possibility, and liminality of diasporic subjects. There are things that are fixed, and there things that must move. As diaspora studies seeks to reclaim histories, reframe the present, and rechart futures, it re-members the fragments that already exist. In speaking of the Yoruba deity Yemaya, Alexander reminds us that “[s]entience soaks all things. Caresses all things. Enlivens all things. Water overflows with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory” (290). Gilroy describes the hermeneutics of the Black Atlantic as having “two interrelated dimensions—it is both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of memory” (71). Biomythography offers a fluidity between fiction and nonfiction that interprets narratives of humanity that might otherwise be illegible. Like the bodies of water that Marshall’s memoir is based on, it connects disparate histories, and varied experiences without losing the distinctions between them. In *Triangular Road* Marshall and her friend “...raise [their] bottles of spring water in a toast to youth and its illusion of immunity” (Marshall 43). They are older and wiser than the twenty-somethings that raft by them. And they understand the movement of the river, the history it holds, and the cyclical nature of re-memembering. They know that “Ending is the stuff of which beginnings are made” (Alexander 133).

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