



# The Quiet Force of Paule Marshall

KELLY BAKER JOSEPHS

In 1985, Paule Marshall gave a talk on “Gender, Race, Class – The limits of personhood” at The College of Wooster in Ohio. The text of this talk is not available (as far as I can tell) but the title is paradigmatic of Marshall’s writings across genre: How, when, and by whom, are women, black women, black immigrant women, considered human? The articles in this special issue of *Anthurium* explore these questions of *personhood* via the timelessness of Marshall’s work, questions that are, sadly, at least as urgent now as they were in 1985. In the United States today, in particular, intersectionality has been exhausted with a palimpsest of challenges: the Hillary Clinton campaign, the Donald Trump win, the myopia of resistance movements, more.

What Marshall’s prose gifts us is not just the language, but also the provocation, to think our multiple identities at once. To think ourselves beyond the given “limits of personhood” and into the possibilities of community. But this vision is not a smooth articulation of difference. Rather, it is the uneven, un-sutured spaces between that allow for growth together. If “all o’ we is [to be] one,” that *one* is jagged, crooked, ever working to maintain the difficult connections. Beginning with her first publication, the short story “The Valley Between,” Marshall attempts to forge these connections via fiction. In her introduction to the reprinting of the story (in *Reena and Other Stories*) she writes: “perhaps instinct told me that as a fiction writer I should try to transform the raw stuff of personal experience into art” (15). The “personal experience” that led to this early work was the combination of sympathy *and* empathy she felt regarding her white female protagonist, Cassie, who “couldn’t possibly be [Marshall] with her gray eyes and fair hair” but whose pain and unfulfillment mirrored Marshall’s experience in her first marriage (16). Meticulous writer that she is, Marshall later considers the story a “flawed first effort” but decides to “let it stand” as testament to her struggles to represent the weight of gender roles, across race, religion, and generations.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Marshall would go on to refine this treacherously arduous negotiation of sympathy for and empathy with the other through her multi-dimensional portrayal of the Boyce family and the Bajan community in Brooklyn. Across gulfs of gender, race, age, and immigration status, the characters and communities in the novel have transformative, but rare, moments of connection. The novel closes with Selina choosing to “turn away” from “all the people she had ever known” in order to survive; but even as she does this, she must preserve her link to them by leaving a bit of herself behind, the arc of her silver bangle imaging the connection.

## ARTICLES



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### KEYWORDS:

Black women; immigrant;  
feminism; queer; sexuality

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Josephs, KB 2023 The Quiet Force of Paule Marshall. *Anthurium*, 19(1): 2, 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33596/anth.509>

This oft-cited closing scene captures the less-noted material aspects of the novel as discussed in Marlene Clark's essay, "'This house belong to me, now': The 'Slumming' and 'Gentrification' of Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn as Experienced and Foretold by Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*." Clark maps the physical and temporal intersections of various ethnic and racial communities in Marshall's Bedford-Stuyvesant, reading the novel against histories of change in the neighborhood and Marshall's careful depiction as a harbinger of the highly-contested gentrification of the space today. In a 1985 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, "Rising Islanders of Bed-Stuy," Marshall traces her personal Brooklyn history alongside the communal Caribbean story of the neighborhood, addressing inter- and intra-racial conflicts that surrounded the West Indian drive to "buy house," as described in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. In 1985, Marshall was still hopeful about restoration of the neighborhood, but in speaking about the young black professionals returning to invest in making the neighborhood home, she writes, "They also recognize that if they do not act quickly, Bed-Stuy, with its high-quality brownstones, could well be overtaken by the kind of gentrification many blacks regard as a form of white takeover" (Marshall, "Rising Islanders of Bed-Stuy," 82). Here, cushioned but direct, is a warning of the gentrification that Clark argues Marshall foretells even earlier, with her first novel.

Marshall wouldn't return to Brooklyn as the main setting of a novel until *The Fisher King*, her most recent novel, published in 2001; but she does set a few short stories in the borough (ironically, "Some Get Wasted" is a Brooklyn story published in an anthology titled *Harlem*) and it serves as an imagined home space for many of her characters. She also includes "Brooklyn" as one of the four novellas in *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, an auspiciously complex work wherein Marshall experiments with genre and perspective. In his short reflective essay, included here, on Marshall's influence on his own writing and pedagogy, John Keene singles out the daring of *Soul Clap Hands* as having had a notable influence on his award-winning *Counternarratives*. Each of the four stories in *Soul Clap Hands* have been anthologized separately (the other three novellas are "Barbados," "British Guiana," and "Brazil") but it is in reading the four together that Marshall's audacity in taking on the perspectives of not just men, but old men, becomes evident. Her juxtaposition of these geopolitical spaces also urges us – decades before the academy does – to reconceptualize the breadth of the Americas when mapping the African diaspora. Marshall's dexterity with perspectival fluidity, hinted at in Book One of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and poised to become characteristic of her later works, is a distinct developing feature in *Soul Clap Hands*. The collection has not yet received the attention it deserves but perhaps with the recent reprint (Martino Fine Books, 2016) more teachers and scholars will take up the challenge Marshall presents with this collection.

Marshall's testing of boundaries in *Soul Clap Hands*, particularly that of multi-character narrative perspective, makes space for the expansive scope of her second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Kamau Brathwaite describes the novel as making "a significant contribution to the literature of the West Indies," though the high praise is qualified by distinctly situating Marshall as "an Afro-American of West Indian parentage" rather than a West Indian herself (226–7). *Chosen Place* is, for me, Marshall's magnum opus. It may not be the one most taught, most read, or most written about, but it is the most intricate and layered of her works, continuing to offer language and metaphors not only for our concerns about the "west and the rest of us" and the fault-lines of this dualistic framework, but also about the "limits of personhood" and the challenges of interpersonal interaction with the growth of globalization.

The very different approaches to *Chosen Place* included in this issue indicate how fertile it can be for us at this historical moment, in which one has to cull the past to understand the roots of—and to locate resources with which to combat—contemporary traumatic social and political violences. In "Ghosts in the Posthuman Machine: Prostheses and Performance in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*," Justin Haynes reads the interaction between humans and machines in the novel as the space within which we might examine the limits of resistance and mobility then and now. Haynes' reading of Vere's Opel is especially compelling amidst current controversies about autonomous automobiles. More interested in the timeless challenges of human interaction in the novel, Shirley D. Toland-Dix reads the novel as Marshall's "audacious" reimagining of the Caliban-Prospero dyad via the Merle-Harriet dyad. Toland-Dix's careful reading of the interactions between

these two complex characters against the larger backdrop of the novel and its concerns argues for the ways in which Marshall articulates and anticipates the later demands of black and third world feminist movements.

In particular, the dynamic Marshall probes between socially (and often financially) privileged white women and less powerful women of color illustrates the implicit “limits of personhood” that plague attempts at intersectionality (when attempts are made at all). The direct link in the novel between Harriet’s choices and the failure of the Bournehills project foregrounds the blind enactment of privilege that we see criticized today in similar “development” projects. Harriet’s consistent alignment with power, even as she professes otherwise, may also evoke for readers comparable contemporary moments in which race and class privilege prevail over the promise of gender and sex equality—think here of the demographic breakdown of results in the 2016 United States presidential election, with 53% of white women voting for Donald Trump while 94% of black women voted for Hillary Clinton. One can easily see parallels between Merle’s insistent truth-telling (especially about Harriet’s complicity) and Angela Peoples’ iconic 2017 Women’s March photo.<sup>1</sup>

After the feat of *Chosen Place*, Marshall’s next novel would be more than a decade in coming; published in 1983, *Praisesong for the Widow* probably vies with *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as Marshall’s most recognized text. *Praisesong*’s popularity is in part due to Marshall’s turn to the question of connection across the African diaspora, a question that was present but muted in her previous works. As academic interest in, and theories of, diaspora developed in the latter part of the twentieth century, scholars often turned to Marshall’s third novel to explore the personal and cultural costs of New World survival. Despite the significant scholarship already published, there is yet still more to learn from *Praisesong*, as Janelle Rodriques demonstrates here in her Afrofuturistic reading of the novel. Rodriques reads the “counterhistories” Marshall presents throughout the novel— via Avey’s memories and memories of stories—as the foundations of an alternative (Afro) future for Avey, and those like her, who have failed to safeguard cultural values in the pursuit of material improvement.

If *Praisesong* is Marshall’s most popular novel, *Daughters* is her most neglected. Beyond brief mentions in a few essays, this special issue continues the silence on Marshall’s 1991 portrayal of the oppressiveness of familial obligation and Caribbean politics. Although this fourth novel seems less compelling for readers, scholars, and teachers than her other works, the personal and political power struggles depicted in *Daughters* are as relevant to us today as themes from Marshall’s other novels. The novel’s critique of Caribbean leadership is especially pertinent to contemporary studies of partisan politics in the region and therefore ripe for scholarly attention. The reasons for its unpopularity might speak volumes about what it is we demand of Marshall (and “our” writers in general) in forms and foci of representation, but I suspect these reasons may be too varied to pinpoint for examination.

Another glaring silence in scholarship on Marshall’s work surrounds the irregular yet conspicuous pattern of same-sex desire woven throughout her oeuvre. Marshall’s depiction of homosexuality has, of course, received some attention in criticism on *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*, the most notable of these being Timothy Chin’s 1997 article “‘Bullers’ and ‘Battymen’: Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature.” Although *Chosen Place* is by far Marshall’s most complex depiction of what may be called queer sexualities in one text, each of her novels (and one novella) contain direct references. For example, the ambiguously homoerotic scenes in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, when the protagonists experience the (re)awakening of desire via the touch of a female friend. And the less ambiguous but still implicit desire between men in the novella “British Guiana.” There are also other, more negative references to homosexuality, particularly male homosexuality, but they are fleeting, as

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<sup>1</sup> A succinct description from Alia E. Dastagir in *USA Today*: “A black woman holds a sign that reads, ‘Don’t forget: White women voted for Trump.’ She stands coolly among the crowd, sucking a lollipop, as three white women in pink cat-eared ‘pussyhats’ tower behind her, all looking at their phones, one smiling, another posturing as if snapping a selfie. The black woman is wearing a hat, too. It reads, ‘Stop Killing Black People.’” Dastagir also provides the statistics on voting by black and white women in the 2016 election.

in *Daughters* with Vinnie's heartbreak and in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* with Selina's disdain for the power hungry but sexually repressed Julian.

Same-sex desire, whether conscious or not, may be treated kindly in Marshall's texts but acting on said desire, embracing a lifestyle that accommodates that desire, is more often than not treated negatively. Except in *The Fisher King*, where queer sexuality has a more central role in the portions of the novel set in Paris, which Marshall believed "was a city that would tolerate and accept that kind of unconventional life" (Hall and Hathaway 164). Although the time period of *The Fisher King* is roughly similar to that in *Chosen Place*, Bourne Island – even its relatively cosmopolitan capital New Bristol – is not nearly so tolerant as Marshall depicts Paris to be. The various references across her works indicate that queer sexuality is very much a part of Marshall's conception of the world, though there is no consistent representation of it (or consistent critical engagement with said representation).

Marshall's representation of Paris as a more sexually "unconventional" city only highlights in *The Fisher King* the ways in which Paris was also racially conservative. It did, of course, hold the promise of freedom for many black Americans, particularly in the mid-twentieth century; but then, and now, in Paris the "lived experience of race – more saliently, anti-blackness – belies the colorblind principle enshrined in the universalist-humanist thought upon which the Republic was forged" (Keaton 2). Thus, in *The Fisher King*, Sonny-Rett finds that the city that once gave him the freedom to become the Jazz musician he could not be in America slowly closes ranks, stripping him of everything but the myth of acceptance. In her essay on the "profound and profane" talent that propels Sonny-Rett into exile, Petal Samuel deftly traces the constant physical and musical "disciplining" he experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Samuel argues that the anti-black regulation depicted in the novel parallels global sanctions against black bodies and music today. Jazz, however, may offer the possibility of escape, a small aperture not only for Sonny-Rett, but also for the women who surround/support him. In "'Her Special Music': Wild Women and Jazz in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*," Patricia G. Lespinasse shifts the frame of the novel from Sonny-Rett to the women around him, reading these female characters as central to jazz and its promise of freedom.

Both Samuel and Lespinasse figure jazz as paradigmatic of Marshall's characteristic representation of the African diaspora as gloriously heterogeneous but foundationally interconnected. In her most recent publication, the memoir *Triangular Road*, Marshall details her literal and textual journeys through the African diaspora, offering readers glimpses into how black geographies influence her fiction. Paying special attention to the bodies of water Marshall uses to organize her memoir (the James River, the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean), Lia T. Bascomb argues that the fluidity of Marshall's narrative of her artistic development situates the text within the genre of "biomythography," à la Audre Lorde's *Zami*.

Closing out this collection of articles is Jason T. Hendrickson's "'How You Mean?': Black Vernacular English, Respectability Politics, and the Enduring Legacy of Paule Marshall," which returns us to Marshall's first two novels while connecting her mastery of language to a range of twenty-first century linguistic performances, from the weight of Rachel Jeantel's testimony about Trayvon Martin to the wittiness of Black twitter. Via these linguistic links, Hendrickson emphasizes the defining thread of this special issue: the bittersweet prescience of Marshall's depictions of intersectional identity and the ways her words remain vibrant today, nearly sixty years after her first publication.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the Anthurium team for all their work in making this special issue move from idea to reality; and to Tzarina T. Prater and Donette Francis for their input on portions of this introduction.

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Josephs, KB 2023 The Quiet Force of Paule Marshall. *Anthurium*, 19(1): 2, 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33596/anth.509>

**Published:** 18 April 2023

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