

11-2-2017

The City-Child's Quest: Spatiality and Sociality in Paule Marshall's The Fisher King

Daphne Lamothe
Smith College, dlamothe@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_facpubs



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lamothe, Daphne, "The City-Child's Quest: Spatiality and Sociality in Paule Marshall's The Fisher King" (2017). Africana Studies: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/afr_facpubs/2

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu



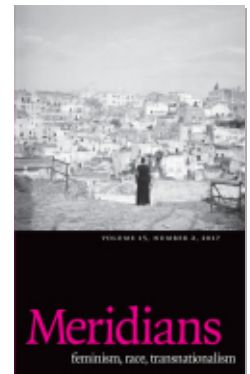
PROJECT MUSE®

The City-Child's Quest: Spatiality and Sociality in Paule
Marshall's *The Fisher King*

Daphne Lamothe

Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism, Volume 15, Number 2, 2017,
pp. 491-506 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/672864>

The City-Child's Quest: Spatiality and Sociality in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*

Abstract

In *The Fisher King*, Paule Marshall depicts urban spatial and social relations that resonate with the psychic and social ruptures of the African Diaspora. The novel's central characters comprise a blended family with Southern African American and Caribbean roots. They reckon with problems of social marginalization, alienation, and fragmentation, engendered by their various experiences of dislocation. While mindful of the diverse histories, values, and worldviews within black America's heterogeneous collectivity, Marshall ultimately privileges black women's perspectives on the limits and possibilities of traversing geographic and social spaces. Hattie Carmichael, the "City child" who occupies the moral center of the novel, embodies practices of cultural improvisation, self-determination, and intersubjective reciprocity; practices that make it possible for diasporic subjects to claim and assign meaning to the places and spaces that they inhabit.

With the 1959 publication of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the coming-of-age tale of Selina Boyce, a second-generation American girl in a West Indian neighborhood in Brooklyn, Paule Marshall compelled readers to take seriously the idea that the stories of black immigrant women could be the subject matter of literature. Moreover, I would argue that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* marks the commencement of a period of African-American women's literary productivity that took off in the 1970s and 80s, and continues to the present moment. And finally, Marshall's first novel,

along with the eight other books she's published in the ensuing years, deserve recognition as important touchstones for contemporary authors, like Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche and Taiye Selasi, who have written well-received novels that use transnationalism to frame their depiction of black women's lives.

For Marshall, an American-born daughter of Barbadian (Bajan) immigrants, a creative ethos, steeped in the commitment to exposing how black women forge their identities by navigating national borders and cultural boundaries, runs through her fiction.¹ In all of her fictional works, characters travel across the Black Atlantic, negotiating multiple, sometimes conflicting, allegiances to multiple homes, including Caribbean islands both real and imagined, the Sea Islands, New York City, and a mythic, ancestral African home. This range of geographic locations constitute a symbolic map of the Black Atlantic world depicted in Marshall's fiction; they are sites of memory, which Melvin Dixon describes as a "memory-generating spaces" in which "a viable [Black Atlantic] culture" is constructed (Dixon, 18).²

Marshall's fifth novel, *The Fisher King* (2001), returns to themes that she explores to great effect in her earlier works. The narrative functions an allegory for the African Diaspora formed through the geopolitical ruptures of the Middle Passage, slavery, and colonialism. These systems, which functioned as the political and economic engines of Western modernity, required the conceptualization of racial otherness, and blackness specifically, to designate a category of people whose subhuman status could be used to justify the exploitation of their bodies and their labor.³ The legacy of these systems, Saidiya Hartman reminds us, is the psychic wounding of the descendants of enslaved peoples, a collectivity whose material and psychic conditions are a constant reminder of black people's status as permanent strangers in Western societies. "The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger," she writes. "Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider" (Hartman 2007, 5). The concept of the black as the stranger runs throughout the novel, illuminated through Marshall's depiction of spatial and social relations in the community at the heart of the narrative.

In this essay, I argue that Marshall privileges the perspectives of the stranger, centering the voices of the most marginalized members of

American and European societies—and especially those of poor black women—in her depiction of the entangled histories of the Payne and McCullum families living in Brooklyn. It may seem odd to claim that this novel continues Marshall’s practice of centering her fiction on black women’s lives, the apparent incongruity stemming from the fact that the emotional, social, and geographical trajectories of this novel orbit around two male characters. First is Everett “Sonny-Rett” Payne, an African-American jazz musician who in 1949 emigrates to Paris to pursue a career in jazz free from his mother’s disapproval and from the injustices of American racism. Friends and family repeatedly recall and celebrate Sonny-Rett’s importance as the man who, because of his fame and talent, put the local jazz club, the Putnam Royal, “on the map” (81). It is certainly no coincidence that society authorizes the male characters—not only Sonny-Rett, but also his brother Edgar, a successful businessman who seeks to rebuild their Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood through a real estate development and revitalization plan—to organize the community’s public spaces, and to construct the narratives that determine their meaning.

The second male character whose narrative is central to the plot can also be read as the novel’s titular namesake: Sonny, the eight-year-old grandson of the jazzman, who is raised in Paris by his guardian, Hattie Carmichael; and who others imagine will be the inheritor of his grandfather’s artistic legacy. Hattie and Sonny’s voyage to the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of her youth functions as part reunion and part introduction, in that Hattie returns home in order to introduce Sonny to the estranged sides of his family on the occasion of a memorial concert in his grandfather’s honor. In this sense, their voyage stands as a figurative representation of the novel’s main themes: return, repair and renewal. These are notions that express characters’ compulsion to reckon with the existential questions of selfhood and belonging raised by their collective history of diasporic displacement.

Marshall conceives of an African Diaspora that functions as a collective that navigates between the poles of fragmentation and unity, with the latter condition suggested in her characterization of Sonny, whose heritage and lived experiences bring together the main geographic coordinates of the Black Atlantic world. Raised in Europe; he possesses ancestry in the American South and the Caribbean through the mother who abandoned him in infancy; and he is connected to Africa through the Cameroonian

father that he has never known, a “*san papiers*,” undocumented immigrant in France. Reflecting on this multiethnic birthright, his great-grandmother remarks, “You got some of all of us in you, dontcha? What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you? Better be somethin’ good” (36). The child’s visit acts as a catalyst, unearthing the elders’ old conflicts and painful memories of separation and loss. And yet the question of what he might accomplish given the abundance of his cultural legacy propels the narrative, which meditates on the possibilities of the family transcending its histories of trauma, loss and separation in order to enact collective healing and reconciliation.

At the same time that the narrative positions the two Sonny’s as the figurative sun around which the narrative’s central questions and conflicts revolve, it is the dialogue and recollections of female characters that convey the communal dynamics, family relations, personal memories, and collective histories of the community. Several characters play key roles in this respect. These include Ulene Payne and Florence McCullum, the matriarchal heads of household and representatives of the West Indian immigrant and African-American communities that produced Sonny-Rett, and his wife Cherisse (née McCullum) who accompanied him to Paris along with Hattie. And most importantly, the narrative privileges the memories and perspectives of Hattie, authorizing her to carry the trio’s stories back to their estranged families. Hattie’s role as guardian of the child and keeper of the past renders her a pivotal figure, perhaps even more central than Sonny, whose youth makes him a nascent symbol of future, perhaps unattainable, healing and wholeness.

Certainly, *The Fisher King*—with its allusions to Arthurian legend, its journey motifs, and allusions to cultural treasure and transformation—establishes itself as an archetypal quest narrative. The narrative would purportedly signal the denouement of the quest through the characters’ achievement of the spiritual healing that is necessary for the re-knitting of their ruptured family bonds and the renewal of black communities and their culture. Given Sonny’s function as an avatar of this ideal of communal blackness, by virtue of his multiethnic heritage and pluralistic upbringing, one might presume that the novel’s title refers to him. Nonetheless, I argue that “the fisher king” more fittingly refers to Hattie, who embodies the psychic and spiritual resilience that are necessary preconditions for the idealized future that Sonny portends.

Throughout the novel, in her various relationships, Hattie acts from an ethos of relationality and belonging that I read as a radical refutation of the practices of exclusion and othering to which most other characters succumb, even as they fall victim to these exclusionary practices within the dominant societal schema. Thus, Hattie, more than either of the Sonny's, embodies the mythical king, tasked with keeping safe the "holy grail," or vessel endowed with the mystical secrets of happiness and wellbeing. In place of an idealized diasporic community that achieves psychic wholeness and collective unity (the promise projected onto Sonny), Marshall offers the model of Hattie, whose orientation toward trauma, self-acceptance, and community-building conveys an idea of diasporic subjectivity that seeks insight by inhabiting the simultaneity of diasporic dislocation and communal vitality. Hattie, more than any other character, is in full possession of the capacity to forge bonds defined by intimacy, love, and respect; at the same time that she reckons with the discursive and structural obstacles posed by antiblackness and racism. As a "City child" whose self-awareness develops through her intimate familiarity with displacement, Hattie embodies strategies for self- and communal preservation that outweigh the utopian vision of the future projected onto her charge, Sonny. Marshall conveys these themes through her portrayal of characters' navigation of spatial and social relations.⁴

In her canonical essay, first published in 1983, on the inspiration she found in the oral traditions of her mother and her mother's circle of female friends, Marshall pays homage to the "kitchen table poets" whose stories inspired her to write in a voice that captured the everyday poetry of her West Indian community. She describes both their diminished social status and pays homage to their use of orality to create counternarratives to this marginalization:

My mother and her friends were after all the female counterpart of Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Indeed, you might say they suffered a triple invisibility, being black, female and foreigners. They really didn't count in American society except as a source of cheap labor. But given the kind of women they were, they couldn't tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word. (Marshall 1983)

This essay celebrates the gossip, aphorisms, and stories that these Bajan women used to communicate their values, traditions, and homegrown knowledge. In tracing her roots as a creative writer, Marshall frames her black female imagination in gendered terms, describing the domestic sphere and oral culture as material and conceptual spaces. They are sites that allow her to center the worldviews of poor black women who exist in societies that only engage them through notions of their nonbeing. The interrelatedness of space, place, and gender become clear when we consider characters' negotiation of their social marginalization and historical dislocation, while at the same time illuminating their strategies for claiming and assigning meaning to the spaces that they inhabit. Black women like Hattie may be relegated to the margins of society, but in Marshall's work they exist as agents in the making of their own destinies and keepers of their and their communities' stories.

In a similar vein, over the course of *The Fisher King*'s narrative, Hattie embraces her place within the community's oral traditions when she agrees to preside over and narrate the memorial concert held in Sonny-Rett's honor that serves as a pretext for her visit. In an interview conducted upon the publication of *The Fisher King*, Marshall explains her reasoning for the title's allusion to myth: "I wanted to suggest the need of the artist for that protection and endorsement in society. I found this a wonderful metaphor for the importance of black culture and the need to protect it" (Stander 2001). Based on these remarks, one can presume that Hattie's storytelling is one example of the black cultural resources in need of protection, equal to Sonny-Rett's jazz and whatever art the younger Sonny—who carries a sketch pad with him everywhere—may produce in his lifetime. I want to emphasize here the significance of Hattie's "performance" in the Putnam Royal, the jazz club that has been designated a historic landmark because it was the site of Sonny-Rett's development as a professional musician. Her ability to use her voice as an instrument to move the audience, which urges her, "Take your time! Take your time!" underscores Hattie's expressive powers. The symbolic import of the location of this performance of orality is equally noteworthy, for it represents an example of "a kitchen table poet's" movement into the public domain, a black woman's being authorized to name and assigning meaning to a communal black space.

I point to the significance of these two very different sites of women's performance of orality—the kitchen and the concert space—because they exemplify Marshall's long history of attunement to the ways in which space and place reflect gendered and racial hierarchies. In yet another example, Lourdes Ropero points to the importance of the public sphere in the author's exploration of social and communal dynamics in her first and final novels. Ropero notes, "Accordingly, the brownstone, an icon of success in American society for Marshall's immigrants, becomes a central figure again." (40). The brownstone which critics identify as a symbol of the Bajan community's emergent, insistent presence in their adopted society, is most closely identified with female characters like Silla Boyce, Selina's mother in *Brown Girl*, and the two matriarchs/grandmothers in *The Fisher King*. Marshall's black female characters claim the brownstone as a symbol of their stake in the city, a visible sign of their intention to stay and their insistence on civic inclusion in their adopted home. My point here is that Marshall may have named the home space of the "kitchen table poets," as the origins of her creative voice, but she has always attended to the ways in which black women navigate through a range of social spaces, private and public, illuminating their strategies for resisting the forces that seek to police their bodies and exclude them from centers of power.

Feminist geographer Doreen Massey conceptualizes space and place in terms of social relations, arguing that space is "social relations 'stretched out.'" This proves true on social and communal levels, for we see characters navigating both visible and invisible boundaries, with race, class and gender determining the limits and possibilities of their abilities to name, organize and assign meaning to space. Massey reminds us that space is not static, and that it instead reflects the power relations, as well as the dynamism, characteristic of social relations (3). The notion that Sonny might achieve something magnificent with "that colored from all over Creation" conveys a collective wish that he would transcend the social death of blackness, mapped onto the neighborhoods in which the characters reside. Marshall describes a locale in Central Brooklyn as ". . . a seedy, down-at-the-heels street where many of the small businesses and storefronts, as well as the four- and five-story walk-ups tiered above them, stood boarded up or burnt out" (46). The idea of blackness as signifier of lack and abjection echoes in the description of structures incapable of providing shelter or warmth,

devoid of social or material value. It resonates also in Marshall's description of Sonny and Hattie's street in Paris, Rue Sauffroy, ". . .with its erupted, crippling paving stones, choked gutters, and ragtag laundry hung out front to dry. . ." (61). As with the first example, the description of physical decrepitude registers the place of blackness within the social imagination. The characters' surroundings register the precarity of their existence within societies that were founded on forced black labor and other forms of racialized exploitation, while continuing to systematically neglect and discount black subjects' material and other needs.

The idea of exclusion frames each character's engagement with physical space. In comparing black neighborhoods on two different continents that share strikingly similar predicaments, Marshall indicts Western societies' histories of racial scapegoating and compels us to reflect on how bodies are policed in order to enforce social order and hierarchies. At the same time, she extends her critique to consider how, within their own communities, black people can also practice forms of exclusion based on class, ethnic and other differences. For example, in the first pages of the novel, Sonny and Hattie peer through the locked iron gate of his great-grandmother's brownstone, wondering if she will let them in. Moreover, using a technique deployed to great effect in her first novel, Marshall introduces the architecture of the Bedford-Stuyvesant setting of *The Fisher King* in ways that simultaneously convey both communal dynamics and the characters' psyches:

They were row houses the like of which he had never seen before, all of them four stories tall under lowering, beetle-browed cornices, all of them hewn out of a dark, somber reddish-brown stone, and all with high stoops of a dozen or more steps slanting sharply down from the second story to the yard. 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. (16)

The "beetle-browed cornices," somber coloring, and aggressive posture of the buildings mirror the appearance and attitude of the frowning Ulene, whom Sonny is about to meet. The description captures something of the character's stubbornness, pride, and severity. It gestures also to the interfamilial conflicts and resentment that have overshadowed her relations to Florence, Sonny's maternal great-grandmother, the enemy

who is the “mirror image” living across the street. Ropero astutely argues that Marshall’s perspective widens in this novel from the parochialism of a Bajan immigrant community to include a fuller accounting for African-American/Afro-Caribbean relations (Ropero, 40).⁶ Through her descriptions of place, Marshall foreshadows the themes of intra-racial interethnic conflict that the narrative will explore more deeply in its portrayal of what sociologist Juan Flores has described as “creolité in the hood.” Flores links the intricacies of urban social relations in the U.S. (the hood) to a notion of cultural hybridity (creolization) produced not in spite of, but *through*, systems of conquest, colonization, and enslavement. These histories of violence and power haunt and continue to influence black subjects and their communities, which Marshall recognizes in her refusal to paint an idealized portrait of this particular urban community. Hence, the Payne/McCullum feud reminds us of the discontinuities within diasporic social formations, even as she uses the metaphor of family to signify a mythic ideal of racial unity. The historic “entanglement” that creates the blended black subject embodied by Sonny also engenders the racial, ethnic, and class conflicts that are about the unequal distribution of power and the ensuing jockeying for position that it creates.

At the same time that recognizing the interrelatedness of spatial and social relations foregrounds the presence of power in these domains, it also, Massey reminds us, underscores the vitality of and potential for transformation inherent in space. She invites us to see the dynamism of social relations in spaces, to imagine space as a site where things can “happen” (3). In this way, Massey’s theorization of space resonates with Michel de Certeau’s focus on the micro-level of social interactions, the everyday as the site of agency in his study of urbanity. Specifically, de Certeau privileges the pedestrian, asserting that “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (97). We can use these frameworks to consider how Marshall’s characters refuse the forces that would produce their alienation from self and place, through the counternarratives they practice and produce as they navigate and inhabit different locations.

In a chapter that frames the emancipatory potential in walking as its central conceit, Hattie declares, “I’ve been a walker in the city from way back” (66). This statement has embedded within it a number of

different meanings. As the “City child” from the same neighborhood as the other characters, but raised in the foster care system, Hattie most embodies the exile and dislocation that are defining characteristics of the Diaspora. She represents, in other words, the flip side of the notion of diaspora represented by Sonny, who reminds us of the dynamism made possible by cultural pluralism and multiplicity. Yet Hattie’s association with the street and with the virtues of walking presents readers with a different model for envisioning everyday possibilities for self-assertion, self-exploration, and self-definition. I think it meaningful that Marshall associates this capaciousness in a poor woman of advanced age, rather than in the youthful and still unformed Sonny. It suggests that the recovery of black subjectivity in Diaspora can be achieved through the mundane and interpersonal interactions, rather than through grand, heroic actions, and events.

Recognizing the opportunity for a different orientation toward the notion of a recuperated diasporic subjectivity in Hattie’s claiming of the sidewalks of Brooklyn and Paris requires that readers identify her with the baudelarian *flâneur*. Yet, by virtue of the character’s race, gender, and class, readers might be inclined to place her in diametric opposition to this figure of bourgeois European modernity. The notion of the man of pleasure developed in 19th century France in response to the rise of urbanization and new patterns of consumption. The archetype of the *flâneur* emerged, Elizabeth Wilson tells us, as the embodiment of a public person with the leisure to wander, observe, and browse.⁷ Moreover, the *flâneur*, when originally conceptualized, was assumed male because of societal anxieties over women’s conformity to expectations of social propriety and fears for their physical safety in the public sphere. Wilson describes this framing as one which views women “. . . as a problem of cities, or cities as a problem for women” (90–110). Black feminist scholars have examined the ways that sociohistorical contexts of racially marginalized women have shaped their experience of public space.⁸ Stereotypes of black women as innately promiscuous exacerbated their vulnerability to rape and other acts of sexual violation. Moreover, particularly in the case of middle class black women, these negative images led to the policing of women’s bodies and behaviors to ensure their conformity to a politics of respectability that was framed as part of the project of collective sociopolitical uplift.

Hattie's declaration that she is a "walker in the city" calls to mind the figure of the streetwalker, recalling society's disparaging views of poor black women, yet it simultaneously gives them license to take up space in the public sphere.⁹

Here, the evening walk also officially began. Because here, after walking several blocks farther east, another world presented itself. Broad, tree-lined avenues that were called boulevards and not just simply avenues as in their part of town, well-kept squares where real Parisians speaking proper French could be seen in the cafés. (63)

There is something of the spirit of exploration and conquest in Marshall's description of the pair crossing the wide expanse of boulevards to enter "another world," something akin to the "colonization in reverse" that Jamaican poet Louise Bennett humorously celebrated in vernacular verse.¹⁰ For Hattie, the habit of walking, or rather wandering and loitering as expressions of leisure, registers as an act of defiance, performed in spite of the societal judgments voiced by her neighbor, Madame Molineaux. Molineaux, a native French woman, assumes stasis as the sign of her own respectability, refusing to leave her apartment, except on rare occasions. More importantly, she claims immobility as a form of protection from Algerian and African immigrants of the *quartier*, whom she associates with "the dirt. The street thieves. The drugs . . . *Les barbares*" (66). Hattie's response to Molineaux's implicit criticism of her own choice to "go out among them in the streets" is to insist: "I've been a walker in the city from way back" (66). With this statement, and the daily trips from city outskirts to city center, Hattie rewrites her identity. No longer orphaned, rootless, or dispossessed, walking allows Hattie to call herself into being as a citizen of the world.¹¹ As she interprets and translates the city for Sonny, she introduces him to world culture writ large, implicitly claiming it as raw material for their own dynamic cultural identities. For example, she names the bas-relief carvings that hang over the entryways of the grand buildings that they pass: Bluebeard, Beethoven, Janus the Roman god, and Joan of Arc. From the vantage point of the child, Hattie's knowledge is limitless. From the vantage point of the reader, the cultural influences of New World blackness are equally without limits.¹²

While the narrative focuses on spatial relations in Paris to illuminate Hattie's strategies for self-assertion and self-invention, it returns to her

native Brooklyn to underscore her radical reimagining of ideas of collectivity. Compared to the cosmopolitan ethos and open-mindedness of Hattie, the African-American and West Indian communities represented by the great-grandmothers, Ulene and Florence, fetishize notions of rootedness and tradition to the extent that they come to embody a stifling parochialism. Each locks herself within a brownstone, surrounded by relics of the past. Ulene's home is characterized by "stale, entombed mustiness" (96). And she chooses to (mis)remember her son, who dedicated his life to the art of musical improvisation, by repeatedly listening to a player piano that mechanically reproduces the classical music that he loathed. Like Ulene, Florence lives in the past in order to forget or ignore the complexities of the present. She memorializes her father's southern roots by planting a magnolia tree carried from his home in Georgia, choosing to indulge in a romanticized vision of the past in favor of remembering the violence that forced her father's flight to the North: "Not that he wanted to. But he had no choice in the matter" (116). The narrative implicitly links their mutual preference to live in past to their inability and unwillingness to accept the idea of cultural change, symbolized most immediately by the marriage of their children. Their misery suggests that in order for the community to experience meaningful renewal, it must practice the kind of broad-minded, improvisational orientation to otherness embodied by Hattie.

In place of notions that collectivity rely on the demarcation of boundaries, hierarchies, and acts of exclusion, Marshall again offers an alternative model in the example of Hattie. At first, as an abandoned child who experiences estrangement as her birthright, Hattie understands the creation of family (the metaphor for community building) to be a zero-sum game, revealing an attitude not unlike the family elders who fear the loss of their children once they fall in love. Hattie walks through the neighborhood, peering with resentful longing into the windows of homes that offer visions of family unity that life has denied her. As she regards the McCullum's dining room, she imagines herself usurping Cherrisse's role: ". . . the longing Hattie felt would become so acute, so filled with anger she would want to rush inside, yank the show-off out of her chair, chase her from the dining room, from the house, from Macon Street even, just dispossess her utterly and install herself at the family table" (70-71). Yet despite her anger and ambivalence, the two girls will develop a

lifelong friendship; and as grown women they construct a notion of family expansive enough to accommodate their different emotional needs.

While living in Paris, Hattie and Cherisse eventually arrive at an agreement to share Sonny-Rett as a lover, despite the fact of the latter two's marriage. From a feminist standpoint, this arrangement does little to disrupt the patriarchal order in that the relationship (much like the novel itself) revolves, at least superficially, around a man. On the other hand, their unconventional arrangement models an orientation toward sociality that stands in direct opposition to the examples set within their home community of Brooklyn. Given that their families raised them with the expectation that opportunities for social mobility depended on their performance of social respectability (more true for Cherisse and Sonny-Rett), their actions are positively transgressive. More importantly, together they demonstrate an ethic of mutuality and reciprocity that their elders have failed to model: "*Partager*. It's the verb 'to share,'" [Cherisse] had once whispered in Hattie's ear, seeing them off to a gig in Cannes" (194). My point here is that the trio constructs a notion of collectivity whose wellbeing depends on their ability to relinquish their anxieties over the notion that certain "resources," such as money or love, may exist in short supply. Instead, they act from a position of psychic and spiritual abundance, creating a family built on the principles of inclusion and reciprocity. As such, Hattie repeats a refrain that functions as a kind of mantra for ethical social relation. As she navigates the various social and communal spaces of the novel, she reminds herself and others: "There're all kinds of family and blood's got nothing to do with it" (18).

Hattie's self-designation as a "City child" points readers toward a potentially transformative orientation to spatial and social relation. My reading of *The Fisher King* proposes that Marshall's depiction of her negotiation of space, especially urban space, makes possible the construction of an alternative vision of black being in relation to community and the larger society. Hattie's navigation through the city makes legible the values and strategies that allow her to thrive in present-day circumstances, even as she contends with the material effects of racism, sexism, and poverty. Thus, her willingness to transgress spatial and social norms, and her openness to encounters with difference prove revelatory. Marshall's depiction of the ways that social identity influences

her characters' experience of space makes possible the narrative's critique of a status quo that uncritically practices domination and exclusion. Moreover, by highlighting black women's versatility and creativity in everyday spaces, she illuminates the psychic orientation that make it possible for them to imagine themselves as whole, and to experience themselves at the center of a world that they refashion to more accurately reflect their own image.

NOTES

1. Gavin Jones identifies Marshall's importance in Black Atlantic thought and writing, linking her fictional corpus to Paul Gilroy's theoretical intervention, and noting that both author and theorist understand the cultures produced in diaspora to be "transnational and intercultural" (1998, 598).
2. Dixon (1994) refers specifically to African-American culture in his discussion of sites of memory, but the relevance of this concept extends to black cultures in the Americas and Europe; hence, my substitution of "Black Atlantic" for "African-American" in the passage cited.
3. For an extended discussion of this topic, see Patterson (1982) and Wilderson (2010).
4. Mary Pat Brady's reading of spatial constructions in Sandra Cisneros' fiction proved pivotal to my own analysis of spatiality and sociality in Marshall's novel (Brady 1999).
5. Massey argues, "The argument emerged out of an earlier insistence on thinking of space, not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (1994, 2).
6. See Roper (2002) for a more comprehensive discussion of Marshall's handling of ethnic conflict as a central component of her Pan-Africanist philosophy.
7. Wilson's discussion of the rise of the *flâneur* and the role of gender in conceptualizations of the trope is especially helpful here (1992).
8. Some excellent examples of black feminist studies that addresses the intersection of race, gender, and sexual politics in black women's navigation of public spaces from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including Carby (1998), Harris-Perry (2011), and McGuire (2010).
9. Hattie's transgressiveness is signaled also by choice of employment as a "wardrobe mistress" of exotic dancers at a burlesque show. My point is that the narrative offers multiple examples of her rejection of respectability politics in favor of cultivating relationships and opportunities that afford her personal satisfaction.

10. Bennett satirized British discomfort with the influx of Jamaican immigrants to England in “Colonization in Reverse”: “An week by week dem shippin off/Dem countryman like fire,/Fe immigrate an populate/De seat a de Empire./Oonoo see how life is funny,/Oonoo see da turnabout?/Jamaica live fe box bread/Out a English people mout.”
11. Wilson suggests, “The heroism—for both sexes—is in surviving the disorientating space, both labyrinthine and agoraphobic, of the metropolis” (1992, 110).
12. Hattie walks in order to assume the privileged vantage point of the *flâneuse*: “For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define” (Baudelaire 1965, 9).

WORKS CITED

- Baudelaire, Charles. 1965. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon.
- Bennett, Louise. 1966. *Jamaica Labrish*. Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster’s Book Stores.
- Brady, Mary Pat. 1999. “The Contrapuntal Geographies of Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories.” *American Literature* 71, no. 1: 117–50.
- Carby, Hazel. 1998. “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues.” In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O’Meally, 470–83. New York: Columbia UP.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Tran. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dixon, Melvin. 1994. “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory.” In *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, 18–27. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Flores, Juan. 2003. “The Diaspora Strikes Back: Créolité in the Hood.” In *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11_Platform 3*, edited by Okwui Enwezor et al., 165–78. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers.
- Harris-Perry, Melissa V. 2011. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2007 *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Jones, Gavin. 1998. “‘The Sea Ain’ Got No Back Door’: The Problems of Black Consciousness in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.” *African American Review* 32, no. 4: 597–606.

- Marshall, Paule. 1959. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- . 1983. "From the Poets in the Kitchen," *The New York Times*. January 9, 1983. <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/09/books/from-the-poets-in-the-kitchen.html?pagewanted=1>.
- . 2001 *The Fisher King*. New York: Scribner.
- . 2009. *Triangular Road: A Memoir*. New York: Basic Books.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.
- McGuire, Danielle. 2010. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Harvard UP.
- Ropero, Lourdes López. 2002. "'Some of All of Us in You': Intra-Racial Relations, Pan-Africanism and Diaspora in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*." *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 26: 39–57.
- Sharpe, Jenny. 2004. "Cartographies of Globalisation, Technologies of Gendered Subjectivities: The Dub Poetry of Jean 'Binta' Breeze." In *Dialogues of Dispersal: Gender, Sexuality and African Diasporas*, edited by Sandra Gunning, Tera W. Hunter, and Michele Mitchell, 715–29. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Smith, Carissa Turner. 2008. "Women's Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *African American Review* 42, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter): 715–729.
- Stander, Bella. 2001. "A Conversation with Paule Marshall." *Albemarle Magazine*. February/March 2001. <http://www.bellastander.com/writer/paule.htm>.
- Wilderson, Frank. 2010. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. 1992. "The Invisible Flâneur." *New Left Review*. January–February 1992. <https://newleftreview.org/I/191/elizabeth-wilson-the-invisible-flaneur>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daphne Lamothe is an associate professor of Africana Studies at Smith College. She is the author of *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture and Ethnography* (UPenn 2008), as well as essays on vernacular culture, cultural memory, and the making of modern black identities. She is now working on a book about black subjects in urban spaces who explore possibilities for blackness in the absence of ideals of home, origin, and belonging.