

“HIMSELF ARMED WITH A LANCE:”
MYTHOLOGIZING TRANSMIGRANT
EXPERIENCE IN PAULE MARSHALL’S *THE
FISHER KING*

REBECA GUALBERTO VALVERDE
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
rgualberto@pdi.ucm.es

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ABSTRACT

Reassessing the notions of transnationalism, diaspora, and transmigration, this article explores the process of mythologization in Paule Marshall’s novel *The Fisher King* (2000) as a strategy to orchestrate transnational reconciliation. Beyond allowing for new considerations on diasporic transmigrant experience and new breakthrough perspectives on myth-criticism research, such mythologizing, as this paper argues, brings about a very eloquent and poignant metaphor for the plight of the mixed African American and Caribbean American community in the United States, whose inner feud is portrayed and eventually resolved in the novel. Effectively, once recreated as quest myth, the transatlantic journey of the African diaspora becomes in Marshall’s text the space for the reconciliation of diversity and kinship as inextricable traits of the African hybridized transmigrant identity.

RESUMEN

Sin dejar de reevaluar conceptos tales como ‘transnacionalismo,’ ‘diáspora,’ o ‘transmigración,’ este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar el proceso de mitologización en *The Fisher King* (2000) de Paule Marshall. Tal proceso opera como estrategia simbólica de reconciliación transnacional pues, además de hacer posibles nuevas consideraciones acerca de la experiencia transmigratoria y proporcionar nuevas perspectivas mitocríticas, según arguye este estudio, las estrategias mitologizantes del texto traen consigo la configuración de una elocuente y conmovedora metáfora del conflicto que enfrenta a las comunidades afro-americana y afro-caribeña en la novela. En efecto, una vez reinterpretado como mito de búsqueda, el viaje transatlántico de la diáspora africana se transforma en el texto de Marshall en el espacio de la reconciliación entre diferencia y parentesco como rasgos inextricables de una identidad africana híbrida transnacional.

The aim of this essay is to explore the mythologizing strategies that operate in Paule Marshall’s *The Fisher King* (2000) in order to analyze how they function as a symbolic device which orchestrates transnational (and trans-generational) reconciliation in the text.¹ First of all, it becomes necessary to provide a definition of the term ‘transnationalism’ as a critical framework from which to explore the ideological, narrative, and symbolic mechanisms of Marshall’s novel. Ben-Rafael and Stenberg have argued:

The notion of transnationalism basically relates to distinct types of activities and communities that illustrate transnational interests and allegiances. The transnational characteristic differs from what is usually meant by ‘international’ and which designates activities setting in contact official bodies—states, universities, associations or parties—belonging to different states. While by ‘transnational’ one also understands relations that run across states and societies, this term focuses on people and groups and do not necessarily refer to official bodies. It conveys, at the difference from ‘international,’ an association with a condition of dispersal in different states and societies of social entities and actors that share an allegiance to some common attributes” (1)

By claiming that the *The Fisher King*’s subject matter in fact gives account of a social condition of dispersal that characterizes the members of a diasporic community—the dispersed community conformed by transmigrants of African descent who indeed share “an allegiance to some common attributes” (Ben-Rafael *et al.* 1), this study proposes a myth-critical analysis of Marshall’s text. Thus this article argues that mythical recreation and reinterpretation serves in Marshall’s novel as a metaphorical device which in effect identifies a whole community’s transmigrant experience with

¹ The myth represented in the novel, as its title alludes to, is the Arthurian myth of the Fisher King, also known as the myth of the Waste Land, or the myth of the Grail. The mythemes and structure of this myth, and its appropriateness to articulate a reflection upon transnational communities will be further on addressed and examined.

a (successful) mythical quest. Hence Marshall's text establishes a renewed literary representation of diasporic realities that—perhaps by means of being rooted in ancient narrative traditions—allows for the symbolic and ideological recognition of difference and kinship as simultaneously integrated traits of the African hybridized transmigrant identity.

In 1995, Glick Schiller, Bash, and Szanton Blanc famously proposed the term 'transmigration' as a more grounded alternative to 'immigration,' arguing that, towards the end of the twentieth century, in a widely globalized world, the reality of migratory movements had indeed changed:

Contemporary immigrants can not be characterized as the 'uprooted.' Many are transmigrants, becoming firmly rooted in their new country but maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland [. . .]. Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state (Glick Schiller et al. 1992a, Basch et al. 1994). They are not sojourners because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country which they reside. However, at the very same time, they engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated. Transnational migration is the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. (Glick Schiller *et al.* 48)

Marshall's novel indeed presents a situation in which members of a transmigrant community—Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Afro-European characters all belong to the same family—"forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Glick Schiller *et al.* 48). Nevertheless, the novel starts off a state of estrangement and separation and builds up—by means of reinterpreting the Arthurian quest myth of The Fisher King—toward communion, reconciliation, and the recognition of a shared communitarian identity. Thus the plot of the novel recreates the family feud between two women, Ulene Payne—an Afro-Caribbean immigrant in New York—and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones—an African American born in Georgia and therefore herself an immigrant in Brooklyn. Their enmity goes on for decades and, in fact, it operates in the novel as the dramatization of what Marie F. Gnage has defined as "the clashes of culture in Brooklyn between African American and West Indian" (112). Such clashes are indeed a real historical separation—exacerbated during the decade of 1960—between Afro-Caribbean immigrants and the African American population; for As Michelle A. Stephens has argued, West Indian Americans, even though sometimes willing, were often forced to "conflate[e] with African Americans due to the shared racial identity of both groups and the 'black-and-white' history of race relations in the United States" (592). Yet, in spite of—or perhaps *because*

of—such sometimes willing, sometimes forced conflation, West Indian Americans and African Americans remained two estranged communities because, as Eva L. Birch explains, “despite their common ancestral heritage in slavery, differing political and economical circumstances had allowed the Afro-Caribbean culture and language to develop along lines which had separated them from the consciousness of the rural black Southern heartland” (88).

The inescapable tension thus created by (mostly political and economical) difference on the one hand, and (often forced) conflation on the other, resulted in a long feud between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. As already mentioned, such long feud is dramatically represented in *The Fisher King* by the long-time quarrel between Ulene Payne and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones. Florence Varina—as it has been stated, herself an immigrant in Macon Street, the Brooklyn block where the best part of the novel takes place—speaks of Ulene as follows: “Her and all those other old W. I.s! Came flooding in here years ago and ruined the block. That’s why I don’t go out anymore, you know. Can’t bear to see what they’ve done to Macon Street and all the streets around here” (Marshall 39). Florence Varina’s words give eloquent account of the xenophobia that separated both communities. With regards to African Americans’ hatred towards Afro-Caribbean immigrants—“Old monkey chaser[s] from the islands” (36), Florence Varina’s calls them—it should be taken into consideration the fact that, perhaps as a consequence of the forced conflation between both groups—symbolically represented by the two sides of Macon Street in Marshall’s novel—Caribbean Americans were always perceived as “maintaining an ambivalent relationship to their American citizenship, and as having a keen loyalty to their islands of origin” (Stephens 592-3). Such perception actually deepened the rift between both communities, which, in the case of women, was especially damaging, for, as Mar Gallego has explained, “being subjected to common discrimination on a gender and class basis, African-Caribbean women w[ere] not able to stand up to their more visible African American sisters, due to fundamental political and economic differences” (185).

In *The Fisher King*, the narrative pretext for the dispute between Ulene and Florence Varina is the forbidden romantic relationship between their children—a defying insolent attempt at a reconciliation between both communities, perhaps—and the repercussions that this romance has for Ulene and Florence Varina, for their children, and for the entire mixed community living in their depressed block in Brooklyn. Florence Varina blames Ulene: “An old crow! She’s the reason that son of hers ran off with my baby. She’s the one to blame. Just put her *away!*” (Marshall 39). Yet, it is precisely that (apparently destructive) relationship between Ulene’s son, Sonny-Rett Payne, and Florence Varina’s daughter, Cherrisse, that ultimately brings redemption to the community. Indeed, communal redemption is made possible because Ulene and Florence Varina finally find some common ground in their shared loved for their Parisian great-grandson, Sonny. The novel is thus mainly

set in 1984, when Sonny, eight-years old, is brought to his grandfather's Brooklyn neighborhood to attend a memorial concert in his honor.

Sonny's namesake's grandfather—Ulene's son—was a jazz pianist in Brooklyn in the 1940s, in spite of his mother, who considered jazz to be "the Sodom and Gomorrah music" (20). Sonny's grandmother, Cherisse, lived across the street, where Florence Varina raised her to be a star, forcing her to take acting, singing, and dancing lessons. Hattie Carmichael, Cherisse's best friend, was an orphan, "a City child" (66), or, in Gnage's words, "the foster child of many" (112). Hattie belonged to neither of the two communities; rootless, Hattie bounced around foster homes across the street, "so long she became just another kid around the block" (Marshall 66). Significantly, during her upbringing Hattie lived with African Americans and West Indians families alike. She was raised somewhere in between, a fact that somehow foreshadowed her role within the three-way relationship which was to develop between Sonny-Rett, Cherisse, and herself, and, of course, her future role as young Sonny's "fathermothersisterbrother" (16). Hattie understands perfectly well that "there're all kinds of family and blood's got nothing to do with it" (16). She is after all, "all the 'kin' [Sonny]'d ever known" (16) and, insofar as she represents the link between both communities—she is, in fact, the link explicitly joining Sonny-Rett and Cherisse—she also articulates, along with young Sonny, the process of transnational reconciliation represented in the novel. When Cherisse and Sonny-Rett leave Brooklyn in order to escape their families' disapproval of Sonny's jazz music and the racism that hindered his career, Hattie chooses to go to Paris with them. Since Cherisse met Sonny-Rett for the first time, and they fell in love, Hattie understood: "it [=Cherisse and Sonny-Rett's falling in love] might be the way things were meant to be, the three of them like the connected sides of the triangles she used to draw in geometry in high school, with her as the base, joining them to herself" (141). Hattie is the base upon which Cherisse and Sonny-Rett stand, and which links them together. Consequently, inasmuch as young Sonny connects Ulene and Florence Varina through their shared loved for him, Hattie also links together the two estranged communities of Macon Street. In fact, both Sonny and Hattie represent what Gilbert H. Muller has identified in other novels by Paule Marshall as "the hybridized identity of the transnational wanderer" (154)—an identity which, as Hattie clearly exemplifies, is always a *chosen* identity, and which in fact challenges all monolithic views on black culture.

THE AFRICAN DIASPORIC IDENTITY

As Florence Varina notices, Sonny has got in him "some of all of [them] (...) all that Colored from all over creation" (Marshall 34). His father is "*un sans papiers*" (207) from Cameroon; his mother, born in Paris, is the daughter of a West Indian American father and an African American mother, both expatriates

in France. Indeed, as Gnage has argued, Sonny embodies the African diasporic heritage (115)—which acquires a full-formed identity in Marshall’s young hero. Nevertheless, in order to fully comprehend the breadth of Marshall’s mythical and symbolic devices in *The Fisher King*, and how they operate in the configuration of its protagonist’s identity, it becomes crucial to address the notion of ‘diaspora,’ as a critical term from which to further on examine the concept of ‘*African diaspora*.’ John Lie elaborates on the notion of ‘diaspora’ as follows:

In articulating transnational diaspora, it is no longer assumed that emigrants make a sharp break from their homelands. Rather, premigration networks, cultures, and capital remain salient. The sojourn itself is neither unidirectional nor final. Multiple, circular, and return migrations, rather than a singular great journey from one sedentary space to another, occur across transnational spaces. People’s movements, in other words, follow multifarious trajectories and sustain diverse networks. Along with the complexity of crossings, the valence of premigration back-grounds has highlighted the diversity of migrant identities. Rather than the singular immigrant, scholars now detail the diversity of immigration circumstances, class back-grounds, gendered transitions, and the sheer multitude of migration experiences (304).

Bearing in mind Lie’s explanation of ‘diaspora’ as a migratory reality defined by the “diversity of migrant identities” which acknowledges the differences among transmigrants in terms of class, gender, and premigration backgrounds, this study requires the examination of the African or *black* diaspora as a distinctive transnational reality, crucial for the understanding of the narrative and ideological scope of Marshall’s novel. In this regard, it must not be overlooked the fact that, as Michelle Wright has explained, “blacks in the diaspora possess an intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences. At the same time, despite this range of differences, they are most often identified in the West as simply ‘Black’ and therefore as largely homogenous” (2). Such complex, problematic reality is indeed present in Marshall’s *The Fisher King*, for the novel reflects upon how western refusal to recognize the diversity inherent to a communitarian hybridized identity—forcing the conflation of Caribbean Americans and African Americans disregarding their despairing heritages—has as a consequence the violent estrangement of two kin communities. Yet in the novel, by means of finally bringing about the healing of his family’s long-term spiritual wounds, young Sony manages to transform the rift between both sides of his family into an unbreakable bond. He therefore becomes a very poignant and very eloquent symbol of transnational reconciliation, and also an almost flesh-and-bone embodiment of an African diasporic identity which simultaneously incorporates diversity and kinship, thus symbolizing in narrative form all the complexities that conform the notion of ‘black diaspora,’ while at the same time resolving the conflict that results, as Wright argues, from trying to distinguish black subjectivity within such African diaspora” (2). The negotiating process that must be carried out in order to

reconcile difference and kinship as simultaneous and inextricable identity traits, and which Marshall settles—as will be explored further on—by means of mythical reinterpretation, is explained by Wright as follows:

For peoples of African descent living in majority-white nations in the West, the harmful and the healing potential of Black self-consciousness, or subjectivity, are both quite clear and quite real. Seeking to determine Black subjectivity in the African diaspora means constantly negotiating between two extremes. On one ends stands [. . .] the hypercollective, essentialist identity, which provides the comfort of absolutist assertions in exchange for the total annihilation of the self. On the other end stands the hyperindividual identity, most commonly found in poststructuralist critiques of racism and colonialism, which grants a wholly individualized (and somewhat fragmented) self in exchange for the annihilation of ‘Blackness’ as a collective term. Any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity, then, must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name. (Wright 2)

Marshall’s novel—in its portrayal of Caribbean immigrants, African American Southerners expelled from their land, African *san-papiers*, African American expatriates in Paris, or third-generation Afro-Europeans—indeed incorporates “the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora” (Wright 2). Yet, as Wright suggests that it must be done, *The Fisher King* narrates the literal and emotional journey by which those diverse identities are linked together in one common diasporic community, defined by kinship as much as by diversity. Effectively though, as this article argues, the means towards such transnational reconciliation—that is to say, towards the configuration of a common African diasporic identity—takes the form of a narrative grounded on the symbolic principles of mythical representation and reinterpretation.

TRANSMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AS QUEST MYTH

Young Sonny—embodiment of the African diasporic identity—identifies himself with an Arthurian knight errant. He always carries around a drawing *bloc* in which he is constantly drawing castles. He took the idea from a book he used to borrow from the church in his *quartier*, so often that “they finally made him a present of it” (Marshall 74). The book was “a big colorful picture storybook with page after page of medieval castles and fortresses and armored knights setting forth on their caparisoned horses to slay dragons and gorgons and to find something called the Holy Grail” (74). Once the book was finally his, Sonny began compulsively to copy each castle and fortress, until he was able to make up his own. Throughout the novel, every time the “big people” (as young Sonny refers to the adults) talk or

argue, Sonny seeks refuge in his drawing blocs, in which he draws not only castles, for “he always drew a miniature version of himself in full armor, his visor down, in the bottom right-hand corner of every drawing. Himself armed with a lance, a wicked-looking halberd, or a Sir Lancelot broadsword” (75). When his great-uncle Edgar asks, “Kinda like your signature, eh?” (75), Sonny says yes, but, in truth, “he had never told anyone, not even Hattie or Madame Molineaux or Jean-Jacques, why he posted himself armed and in full armor on each page” (75). “Where’d you get the idea to draw all these castles?” (74), his great-uncle asks. The idea (along with the reason for drawing the castles) comes from Sonny’s namesake grandfather, Sonny-Rett, whom Young Sonny wishes to protect. Young Sonny does not identify himself with any knight, after all; he is the knight in charge of protecting the Fisher King—who gives title to the novel.

In Arthurian mythology, The Fisher King is the wounded king of the Waste Land. This mythical character appears for the first time in the earliest extant version of the Quest of the Grail; that is, the *Conte del Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes, an unfinished courtly romance composed probably between 1175 and 1190 (Loomis 28). Loomis translates: “. . .he is a king, I assure you, but he was wounded and maimed in a battle, so that he cannot move himself, for a javelin wounded him through the two thighs. He is still in such pain that he cannot mount a horse, but when he wishes to divert himself, he has himself placed in a boat and goes fishing with a hook; therefore he is called the Fisher King” (36). The Fisher King is thus wounded between the thighs, so he has been rendered sterile; consequently, the king’s infertility results in the wasting of the land—due to the inextricable mystical relationship that bounds the fates of the king and its kingdom in medieval romance. It follows that, in order for the land to be restored to its fertility, the king’s wound must be relieved. Such task falls upon the hands of the Grail Knight, who must find the Grail—or alternatively the meaning behind the Grail—in order to heal the Fisher King and, consequently, restore the Waste Land. In Chrétien, the Grail is a magical source of nourishment for the Fisher King.² Perceval—the Grail Knight—must inquire about its meaning, but he fails in his task: “. . .he refrained from asking what [the Grail] meant for he was mindful of the lesson which Gornemant gave him, warning him against too much speech, and he feared that if he asked, it would be considered rude. So he held his peace” (Loomis, trans. 32-3). The morning after, Perceval encounters a young damsel who lets him know of his error: “Ah, unfortunate Perceval, how unlucky it was that you did not ask all those things! For you would have cured the maimed King, so that he would have recovered the

² “And believe me that the rich Fisher is the son of the King who causes himself to be served with the grail. But do not think that he takes from it a pike, a lamprey, or a salmon. The holy man sustains and refreshes his life with a single mass-wafer. So sacred a thing is the grail, and he himself is so spiritual, that he needs no more for his sustenance than the mass-wafer which comes in the grail. Fifteen years he has thus without issuing from the chamber where you saw the grail enter” (Loomis, trans. 44).

use of his limbs and would have ruled his lands and great good would have come of it!" (37-8). So Perceval fails in his task to cure the Fisher King and restore the Waste Land in the first version of the Grail myth, but young Sonny succeeds in his heroic quest, and so Marshalls narrates—and mythologizes—the regeneration of the African diasporic community portrayed in her novel.

In *The Fisher King*, young Sonny enacts the part of the Grail Knight, and his grandfather, Sonny-Rett, is represented as the wounded Fisher King. The reader learns this when Sonny confesses the true reason behind his drawings to his American cousins. Sonny's cousins live in a "magazine house" (Marshall 146) in a white neighborhood: "Can't see what color your neighbors are, can you, what with all these trees?" Hattie asks. Edgar Payne answers: "Nope [...]. And that's the way we like it. So do they, I'm sure!" (147). As it can be often found in her work, Marshall portrays life in the city as "the means for integrating black people into a grinding labor mill out of which a few will emerge as the upwardly mobile black bourgeoisie, destined for the stifling life of the suburbs" (Willis 56). Yet, such "stifling life" makes a "wasteland" (Willis 57) out of the suburbs, which consequently are not represented as counterpart to the life in Brooklyn's "near-ruin" Macon Street, but, in fact, as a continuation of that "stifling" life. Hence, even living in a "magazine house" in a white neighborhood, Sonny's great uncle Edgar and his cousins, alongside Ulene and Florence Varina, are all part of the same mixed transnational community—even if Sonny's cousins cannot understand "that old West Indian way [their great-grandmother Ulene] talks" (Marshall 153). Such community—represented in Marshall's novel as endangered and in need for restoration—is tightly knitted in spite of the differences in terms of culture and class, as becomes obvious when Sonny—a third generation Parisian—feels an immediate kinship to his American high-middle class cousins, and decides to reveal to them the mystery of his drawings:

'Who's this?' [his cousin] wanted to know, pointing to the miniature knight in full armor and fully armed in the lower right-hand corner of each page.

'Me,' he said.

Who was he guarding?

He told her. He told them both. He had never before told anyone, not Hattie or Madame Molineaux or Jean-Jacques, but he suddenly found himself telling his cousins that his namesake grandfather lived inside the castles and fortresses, placed there by him for safekeeping. And not only was he safe, he has healed as well, all the bloody head wounds he had suffered in the Métro completely healed, his head, his face restored to that of his billboard image about the entrance to the Club Belle Epoque. (154-5)

In young Sonny's mind, the Fisher King is in fact his West Indian American grandfather, Sonny-Rett, an expatriate in Paris who went in exile because of his family's rejection and that, perhaps, was brutally murdered by the police for refusing to show them the residency card—which he always kept in his wallet—in a tragic gesture of

rebellion. Significantly as far as the notions of transmigration and transnationalism are concerned, it should be noted that at the time of Sonny-Rett's death, Europe's interest in jazz—the music played by the Afro-Europeans—had been replaced by “a whole lotta noise that the white boys playing it had the nerve to call Rock and Roll and even Rhythm and Blues” (Marshall 200). Yet, despite the violent waves of racism in Europe, Sonny-Rett refused to leave Paris and go back to New York. So when the police, “cracking down on the undocumented” (201), stopped him one night in the subway, he (allegedly) fell down the stairs, “repeatedly striking his head on the way down” (202). But, of course, “only les flics had been there” (202).

In a very eloquent manner, Sonny-Rett's death in Paris—most certainly a racist hate crime—and his grandson's wish to restore “all the bloody head wounds he had suffered in the Métro” (154) illustrates neatly how African culture—understood from a transnational diasporic perspective—is perpetually wounded and threatened. Sonny's self-identification with an Arthurian knight in charge of protecting (and restoring) the memory of his grandfather is, in terms of Marshall herself, “a wonderful metaphor for the importance of black culture and the need to protect it” (Marshall; *Interview* par. 5). Yet, as Toni Morrison argues, black culture can only be protected by restoring the ancestors; in this case, by restoring the memory of Sonny Rett by means of the memorial concert held in his honor at the end of the novel. Indeed, “near-ruin” Macon Street—the novel's clearest wasteland—is restored right after the “joyous celebration of the man and his art” (209) for, “the city is *wholesome*, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure” (Morrison 39, my italics). Towards the final part of the novel, after Sonny-Rett's memorial concert, Sonny's cousin says to him: “We know where he [=Sonny-Rett] really is, don't we? [...] He meant safely inside the drawing *bloc*” (Marshall; *Fisher* 209). Such line illustrates how Sonny's drawings of his grandfather and of himself armed as a knight indeed function as a symbol for his actual restoring of the mixed African American and West Indian community of Macon Street's “near-ruin” block. By honoring the memory of Sonny-Rett—who once had been rejected and expelled from the community—young Sonny restores his vitality and, as a consequence, the vitality of the entire community as well, “for the ancestor is not only wise; he or she values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfillment” (Morrison 43). Hence restoration—mythologized as it is—happens in the end through racial memory and transnational (and trans-generational) reconciliation.

During Sonny-Rett's forced exile, Macon Street had become a sort of spiritual, but also physical, wasteland. In fact, by the time Hattie returns to Brooklyn with young Sonny four decades later, Edgar Payne is the head of the Three R's Housing Group of Central Brooklyn. The three R's stand for reclamation, restoration, and rebirth—these are, of course, the main themes of the novel. Even though the representation of Macon Street as a physical and spiritual wasteland illustrates

one of Marshall's biggest concerns throughout her work,³ in *The Fisher King*, the spiritual wasting of the land spreads far beyond the blocks of Brooklyn. As the mythical Fisher King, Sonny-Rett is sick; but so is everyone surrounding him. In Hattie's words, Sonny-Rett's life "became a long free-fall down the steps of the Paris subway years before that awful thing actually happened" (201). After each performance, Sonny-Rett used to take what Hattie and himself referred to as "his *medicaments*." The euphemism for the drugs suggests that, in fact, Sonny-Rett was truly sick, even if his sickness was of a spiritual kind. Hattie was sick as well, for she took the same drugs as Sonny-Rett—"to soothe her and *restore her*" (220, my italics)—and is still taking them when she and young Sonny travel to Brooklyn in 1984. On a different but not unrelated note, Cherisse—the third vertex of the triangle conformed by Sonny-Rett, Hattie, and herself—dies of breast cancer, but hers is "a needless death" (202), for the tumor could have been easily removed; but she refused to "hav[e] anybody cut on [her]" (203). So the presence of sickness, violence, and "needless death" (202) in the novel is inescapable and, as it taints the stories of Sonny-Rett, Cherisse and Hattie, the text once again insists upon the need to protect a wounded, endangered community. Alongside, the characters' journey—from New York to Paris and back to New York—along with the journey of the previous generation, definitely configures a transnational diasporic perspective on such wounded, endangered black culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Ulene Payne, West Indian, grew up "dreaming [...] of leaving the little miserable two-by-four island for big America soon as the war finish" (97). And she followed her dream: "1918. The war finish. The white people tired killing each other for a time. And soon as it finish she and Alva book passage" (97). Meanwhile, Florence Varina's family—descendants of African slaves—had to move to Brooklyn after her father had been terrorized out of Varina, "the only county in Georgia at the time where Colored were allowed to own land" (115). Not only could not African Americans own land anywhere else, but they were also expelled from the places where they could, thus being forced into a rootless nomadic existence. In Brooklyn, in the 1940s, both Ulene and Florence Varina are immigrants, both established for life in New York. However, their children are forced to flee to Europe, hence prolonging the nomadic experience, so to speak, of their transnational mixed community. Indeed, Florence Varina and Ulene only find peace once their Parisian great-grandson—a third generation Afro-European—travels to Brooklyn to restore

³ "...in tracing her arcs of recovery, Marshall implicitly raises the question of the urban environment and specifically whether American cities have proved to be fertile ground for the aspirations of black people" (Willis 56).

the memory of Ulene's exiled son, Sonny-Rett, thus closing one return journey across the Atlantic, which is in fact a perpetually ongoing journey—the transatlantic journey of the African diaspora.

In *The Fisher King*, this journey is symbolically represented as a mythical quest. In such a quest, “reclamation, restoration and rebirth are the objectives Marshall’s grail seekers must achieve” (Spender). Hattie and Sonny are Marshall’s grail seekers and, where Hattie fails, Sonny succeeds, because rebirth does not come without its dose of cruelty. In the end, Hattie is forced to give up Sonny, whose face “reflected them all: Sonny-Rett, Cherisse, JoJo [...] It contained all three of her loves; moreover, it *restored them* to her intact, along with the life they’d had together” (208, my italics). Sonny does not simply bring restoration and rebirth to Macon Street, but also to Hattie, and to the lost lives of her lovers, Sonny-Rett and Cherise, and their daughter, JoJo, who was also raised by Hattie before she ran away at fourteen. Now, at the end of her life, Hattie must give up Sonny so he stays in Brooklyn with his great-uncle Edgar. Edgar argues: “He’s the one hopeful thing that’s come out of the thirty-year war and disunity on this block. Let him go. Over here will never be any paradise for us, we both know that, but at least I have the means to make things easier for him and to protect him as much as that’s possible” (217). At the end, Sonny does not transform a wasteland into a paradise—his community remains endangered, and thus needs to still be protected—but he does bring peace to the community after thirty years of war.

As this article has claimed, the identification of Sonny with a knight errant throughout the novel in fact mythologizes transmigrant experience and diasporic identity. In Marshall’s novel, a pre-modern European myth arguably becomes not just a symbol of transnational redemption, but actually operates as a strategy to reconcile DuBois’s “double consciousness” as “two-ness” (11)⁴ into the “double consciousness” of Gilroy’s *Back Atlantic* (1993), insofar as the reinterpretation of Arthurian mythology as transmigrant experience in the text—as Gilroy’s renewed notion of “double consciousness”—“occupies the space of both identities [and] tries to demonstrate their continuity” (Gilroy 1). In *The Fisher King*, the two alternating consciousness—black / American; but also, black / West Indian; and, black / European—come together in a sense of community that, once perceived as diasporic, becomes integrating as well. As Stuart Hall has argued, communal identity “is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 222). In the case of Marshall’s novel, African diasporic identity is constituted within *mythical* representation. Once recreated as the myth of a successful Grail quest, Sonny’s journey across the Atlantic in fact

⁴ “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One never feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 11).

brings about transnational reconciliation. This study thus has examined an instance of "black transnational" (Stephens 598) (re)interpretation of Arthurian mythology. Hence mythical representation in Marshall's novel produces "[an] *international* political and cultural conception of black collective identity" (598); a conception which is symbolically rooted in pre-modern mythical narratives. Beyond allowing for new considerations on diasporic transmigrant experience and allowing for new breakthrough perspectives on myth-criticism research, such mythologizing process in *The Fisher King* brings about a very eloquent and poignant metaphor for the plight of an entire community, bound together despite their diasporic condition by an inextricable kinship, and by those elements which precisely configure the myth in question, namely: sickness, violence, rootlessness, and the perpetual quest for restoration.

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