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"Her Special Music": Wild Women and Jazz in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*

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Paule Marshall's novel *The Fisher King* (2000) weaves an intricate tale about generations of women and jazz music. Like Marshall's classic novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Fisher King* explores the centrality of women's stories as they improvise on language and image to deliver unique yet familiar narratives about family life within the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Significantly, unlike *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *The Fisher King* weds female-centered cultural narratives with the jazz aesthetic.[1] Jazz music haunts the staccato rhythm of black women's lives as they learn to improvise to survive; jazz band dynamics abound as women call and respond to the tension that permeates the culturally diverse community of Bedford-Stuyvesant; and jazz improvisation characterizes the recurring musings of the protagonist, Hattie Carmichael, the one "closest" (Marshall 26) to the music of legendary jazz musician Sonny-Rett Payne, the novel's namesake.

Yet, the vital role that women have throughout the text is not evident in any promotional material associated with the novel. In fact, women are excluded from the title and jacket copy of the book:

> In 1949 Sonny-Rett Payne, a black jazz pianist, fled New York for Paris to escape both his family's disapproval of his art and the racism that shadowed his career.… Decades after Sonny-Rett left, his eight-year-old Parisian grandson is brought to his old Brooklyn neighborhood to attend a memorial concert in Payne's honor. The child's visit reveals the persistent rivalries within the family and the community that drove his grandfather into exile. Will the young boy be a harbinger of change and reconciliation or a pawn in the power struggle of those who now wish to claim him in Sonny-Rett's name?

This synopsis elides the story's women: Sonny-Rett Payne flees New York with his wife, Cherisse, and Hattie soon follows; Hattie brings Sonny-Rett's grandson, Sonny, to Brooklyn. After Hattie and Sonny return to Brooklyn for the concert, we learn that it was only a ruse to entice them back to New York, a development that makes Hattie's homecoming with Sonny central rather than peripheral to the narrative. Through this synopsis, Marshall's jazz novel has been unjustly marketed and often read as a patrilineal text in which black women's voices constitute a barely audible hum, in contrast to the blaring sounds of the male jazz musician, Sonny-Rett Payne. However, a close reading of the novel reveals the audacious voices of the women in the text, particularly Hattie Carmichael's narration of and claim to Sonny-Rett Payne's legacy. Indeed, Hattie becomes the vessel through

[1] See Rosenthal's extensive chapter on *The Fisher King* in *New York and Toronto Novels*.

which Sonny-Rett can be reborn and memorialized. Thus her narrative voice—her "special music"—makes Sonny-Rett's jazz music possible.

Throughout *The Fisher King*, Marshall underscores Hattie's role in Sonny-Rett's life and, more broadly, the role of women in jazz discourse.[2] Hattie provides a jazz cadence that contextualizes black women as an integral part of the jazz tradition. She functions as the bass line of the jazz novel, bearing witness to Sonny-Rett's work and translating his success and failures for the community of listeners. In addition, Hattie literally serves as the purveyor of the music, selling jazz records in a music store. Moreover, as a jazz impresario, she manages her own all-girl band as well as Sonny-Rett's career, and she is viewed as the "fathermothersisterbrother" (Marshall16) to the music's heir, Sonny. Hattie's significance in Sonny-Rett Payne's life and in the novel more broadly testifies to the pivotal role that women played as interlocutors of jazz discourse.

Although recent scholarship on *The Fisher King* has acknowledged Hattie, she has yet to be read as the main protagonist who generates the action and ultimately becomes the heroine.[3] A feminist reading of *The Fisher King* focusing on Hattie Carmichael and the novel's other women positions them as the archival bodies that pass on the legacy of jazz and ultimately free the music from its structural and gendered boundaries. Marshall literally and figuratively creates a space for black women to find agency and challenge the male-dominated narratives about jazz music in the United States and abroad. Marshall constructs Hattie as an improviser and innovator, thereby placing women at the center of jazz literary discourse. Using a jazz lens that consists of three motifs that recur throughout women's jazz novels—the Wild Woman, the jazz moment of improvisation, and call-and-response—this article explores how Marshall employs jazz's essential elements of improvisation and freedom to highlight the significant role that women have played in the creation and development of jazz music, delineating the stories that prevail long after the music has stopped playing. Ultimately, *The Fisher King* becomes a prime example of Marshall's ability to (re)inscribe the interconnections among women, jazz music, and oral tradition.

WILD WOMEN

The Wild Woman in jazz literature is predominantly seen as a figure of resistance who uses improvisation to refashion her identity to gain agency and self-efficacy. *The Fisher King* explores the Wild Woman trope through such characters as Ulene Payne, Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, Cherisse Jones, and Hattie Carmichael.

[2] Marshall is not the only woman writer to appropriate jazz discourse. See Tucker, "Where the Blues and the Truth Lay Hiding" and Griffin, "It Takes Two People."

[3] Lowney, "'New Kind of Music,'" posits Hattie Carmichael as a "co-protagonist."

These women continuously, figuratively, and literally improvise on their sexuality, voice, and history in an effort to preserve their dignity and allow them to gain agency. What differentiates these women from other characters is their ability to "cut-and-contrive" (Marshall 99)—that is, to improvise and reconstruct gendered boundaries and thereby reclaim power by challenging the middle-class African American politics of respectability.[4]

Historically, *wild woman* has been synonymous with such terms as *untamed*, *licentious*, *wicked*, *alluring*, and *overtly sexual*. In *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, Kimberly Wallace asserts that "the bodies of black women have not only been identified as erotic objects but have symbolized the most extreme sexuality imaginable: wild, insatiable, and deviant" (185). The connection between the black female body and "wild" sexuality has roots that extend back deep into the 1800s with the image of the Hottentot Venus, who exemplified the explicit exploitation and objectification of the black woman. According to Maria Cristina Nisco:

> Saartjie Baartman, known to the Western audience as the Hottentot Venus, can be said to fully embody darkness for her being both African and a woman. Her black body was a mystery to the white European gaze, which consequently caged it and turned it into a mere object of curiosity and knowledge: the excessiveness of her genitals and buttocks are shown as proof of the wild sexuality characterizing black women. Parts of her body were exhibited during her life as well as her death (the Musée de l'Homme in Paris kept them until 1992). (65)

The link between the black female and wild sex and sexuality has reappeared as a theme in blues music and novels. More recently, jazz literature has revised the Wild Woman and the signifiers attributed to her as agents of improvisation.

The *Fisher King* begins with Ulene Payne standing at the iron gates, guarding the entrance to her home, in which resides a grand piano that symbolizes jazz music, generations, and tradition. She taught Sonny-Rett how to play classical music through the art of improvisation on this player piano. The iron gates that stand between her and eight-year-old Sonny Carmichael Payne are closed to Hattie when she brings Sonny to visit his great-grandmother. Seen as an outsider, Hattie is not permitted to enter. Despite the silence at the gate, body language speaks volumes—a "cut eye" (Marshall 15) that lets Hattie know that the older woman wants to be alone with her great-grandson. As soon as Hattie, the interloper, leaves, the gates swing open, and Sonny is allowed access into the home, which "reminded him of the castles and fortresses he was good at drawing" (Marshall 14). It is not

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[4] For the politics of respectability, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* and Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*.

by chance that the gatekeeper in his drawings is male, while in reality he stands before a female. This juxtaposition at the outset of the novel foreshadows the gendered and generational parallels that are repeated throughout.

Inside, Ulene leads Sonny through her filthy home into a room with a pristine grand piano. Here, Ulene introduces Sonny to his grandfather via photograph and shows him how to play the piano in the same way she taught her son:

> First, she slowly spread his fingers and arched them slightly. This done, she then began guiding his hands to where the keys left and right were sinking down, trying to reach them and place his fingers on as many of them as possible in the fraction of a second before they rose again. For the longest time she repeatedly steered his hands back and forth across the keyboard, showing him how the game was played, while the huge sheet of paper with its hieroglyphics of cuts and nicks scrolled majestically down before his eyes and the music soared. (21)

Ulene is in the position of teacher and mentor. Although the player piano is playing classical music, Sonny's hand movements are improvised and in the tradition of stride piano. Improvisation for Ulene is not limited to teachings on the player piano; it becomes her way of life as she learns how to "cut-and-contrive" to survive in America.

Traveling on the SS *Nerissa*, Ulene made her way to New York with her friend, Alva, "with nothing but a gripsack and two willing hands" (Marshall 97). She took on work cleaning homes on Long Island and taking care of other people's children until she married Bertram Payne and had two kids of her own (98). But then her husband died suddenly:

> [Bertram] never sick a day in his life and then one night in his sleep a stroke. They said it was a stroke. You wake the morning to find the man dead next to you in bed. And the house on Macon Street the two of you just start to buy to be paid for, the mortgage they had to get from the loan shark when the banks refuse them being they was Colored, higher—three, four time higher—than any bank's. And two boychildren to raise her one. And times hard after that idiot Hoover near-ruined the country. Rich people turned poor overnight throwing themselves out the windows cause they don't know how to cut-and-contrive. That's what you must do, y'know, when times is hard. Is what she, Ulene Agatha Payne, born Cummings, Mis' Cummings' girlchild, did right away: cut-and-contrive. (99)

To cut-and-contrive, simply put, is to improvise. Ulene thus learns the art of improvisation to make a life for herself and her children. As Paul Berliner writes in *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, improvisers "perpetually make split-second decisions about suitable materials and their treatment" (497). These split-second decisions are rooted in memory, characterized by deliberate spontaneity, and replete with creative possibilities that transcend the musical score. Ulene demonstrates the art of cutting-and-contriving in three instances. First, she literally cuts her home into multiple spaces by constructing rooms for boarders. Second, she returns to working for white people. Third, she sells handed-down gifts to earn money. She does these things to "meet the loan shark mortgage each month and to pay for Everett's lessons." For Ulene, "it was cut-and-contrive down to the very toilet paper" (Marshall 100).

Ulene was not the only woman who had to learn how to improvise a living to remain financially intact: "West Indian and American alike—everybody catching it but a hundred times worse if you black—crowd together, sheltering from the rain, hot sun, and snow under the stairs to the El at Albemarle Road and waiting to dash out in the road the minute a car with a Madame at the wheel start to pull over" (Marshall 99). Ulene and many other women in the community, including Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, had to improvise to meet the financial demands of running a single-parent household. Despite the fact that she is of a different culture and socioeconomic standing from Ulene, Florence Varina, too, is financially unable to sustain her living, though in her case it is because of divorce rather than death. As Ulene remarks, "The foolish woman din' know it but she was gon have to learn how to cut-and-contrive" (100).

Florence Varina indeed learns to cut-and-contrive, by convincing the Conservancy to acknowledge her home as a historic site. After she is humiliated by an employer who demands that she wears the same colored bow as the dog she has been asked to walk, Florence Varina becomes determined to ensure that her daughter, Cherisse, can continue "the singing, dance and acting lessons" that could make her into a modern-day Lena Horne (Marshall 119). After chancing upon a brochure for the "Landmark Conservancy Tours, Brooklyn Chapter," Florence Varina "appeared at the Conservancy office downtown Brooklyn armed with pictures of the full grown Magnolia Grandiflora in her front yard. She also brought the family bible with its date of birth entered in Gayton McCullum's hand and proceeded to tell the story of how it came to be.… Florence Varina talking for dear life" (120). In Marshall's text, language rather than music serves as what Kenneth Burke calls "equipment for living (593)." Yet like music, language can be fluid and can achieve the improvisatory qualities inherent in jazz. The solemn story about her father's journey from the South to the North that Florence Varina delivers for the weekly tour can be read as neither fact nor fiction but rather as improvisation.

Traveling with her father from the South, "Miss Grandiflora," as Florence Varina calls the tree planted by her father that has been growing in her backyard since April 9, 1889, represents both tenacity and rootedness and serves as a reminder of the Great Migration. Miss G. is also a symbol of longevity for the African American community, which felt displaced but nevertheless survived in the North. Intertwined with this tree's branches, Florence Varina is the first McCullum child to be born in the North. Thus, her name appears in the family Bible after that of Miss G., whom Florence Varina describes as the "real tree that grows in Brooklyn" (Marshall 113). Florence Varina McCullum is named after a piece of land—more specifically, "the only county in Georgia at the time where Colored were allowed to own land" (115). Florence Varina muses that her father "went and put Varina in [her] name. As another reminder, I guess, along with Miss G., of the one place on God's earth where he'd once had his own land" (120). Thus, freedom is inherent in Florence Varina's name, and this freedom is seen in her improvisatory style. She uses Miss G. to maintain that freedom as financial security through her improvisation with the Conservancy tour.

Others in the novel recognize Florence Varina and her mastery of improvisation, highlighting the centrality of the cut-and-contrive to women's lives. When Sonny brings a branch of the tree into Ulene's home, she admits that Florence takes the prize for knowing how to cut-and-contrive:

> Come marching in here with part of some old tree that [Florence] been fooling the public with for years, claiming it's a tree her father planted all the way back when God said "Come, let us make trees," and that her father—he must have been an obeah man—was the only body to get it to grow 'cause it wasn't suited to the weather up here. All of it nothing but some who-struck-john story. But I know she got people to believe her. Every week you see a van pulling up to the house. Foolish people paying good money to come see it and to hear the who-struck-john story. I tell yuh, I have to hand it to her. I thought I knew how to cut-and contrive to keep going, but old-miss-young walks away with the prize." (Marshall 170)

Florence Varina's ability to construct the "personal story" of Miss G.'s voyage from the South to the North can be read as a performance filled with improvised language and images from the beginning of her story, where she evokes jazz music by comparing herself to "that Duke Ellington song: 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore'" (113), to the "theatrical pauses" (117), and finally to the props such as the Bible and the wax fruit that looked like a "grenade" (120). Florence Varina's weekly story becomes a performance, and she, with her "russet-dyed hair, her cover girl makeup, her earrings and choker and the even more elaborate at-home gown,

almost a ball gown… a pair of high-heeled mules in the same fabric as the gown," (112) becomes like Lena Horne—the embodiment of her dreams for Cherisse.

Expanding the branches of the family tree, Cherisse is known for her "Shirley Temple curls" and for her singing ambitions, and many, particularly young Hattie, envy her:

> Sometimes peering at the tableau inside 258 from the hunter's blind provided her by the darkness, 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. (Marshall 69)

However, rather than replacing Cherisse, Hattie becomes her friend—so close, in fact, that in junior high school they were kissing friends, the "kind of friends that prompted the other kids to say: 'If you sees one, you know you gots to see the other!'" (69). Hattie and Cherisse are described as one, "Hattie losing her ordinary-looking self and becoming with each deep kiss and caress the much-loved, dressed-up, prized daughter at the dining room table" (Marshall 70). Further, as an adult, Hattie gathers Cherisse and three other women to begin an all-girl group, the Maconettes. Cherisse thus becomes the object not only of Hattie's gaze but also that of an audience. Although Cherisse's stardom is short-lived, her desire to be wanted or the object of the gaze never ceases: "Cherisse behaved at times as if she was actually on the bandstand performing with [Sonny-Rett] and the trio or the band. Because when a tune ended and the applause rose, she would often, without being aware of it, bow her head ever so slightly and smile, appropriating part or perhaps all of the applause for herself in acknowledgment of her perfect limbs, perfect breasts, and the milk chocolate perfection of her face" (Marshall 183). Sonny-Rett remarks approvingly, "Being admired is far more important to [Cherisse] than love any day" (183). Both Hattie and Cherisse embody improvisation through a marked fluidity of their sexual identities. Cherisse explores her desire for admiration by engaging in intimate relationships with both her husband and Hattie. Hattie recalls that Cherisse used French term "*Partager* it's the verb to share … then she smiled wickedly and kissed her on either cheek" (Marshall 192). The three were inseparable, "a flesh and blood triangle" with Hattie serving as the "base that connects the two" (Marshall 184).

Although both Hattie and Cherisse exhibit fluid sexualities, Hattie's ability to resist the boundaries associated with gender norms and other power structures that attempt to restrain her socially, culturally, and sexually marks her as the quintessential Wild Woman, from her improvised sexuality to her spontaneous performances. Hattie's sexual relationship with Cherisse continues until Cherisse

dies of cancer: "Up to the end she nursed her all day, and sometimes on the nights when she didn't work, Hattie held her—a mere wraith—in the bed and ever so gently loved her as when they were girls practicing their kissing and touching upstairs at Mis' Dawson's, reassuring her gift of a best friend that she would always possess the power to draw every eye in a room to her perfect self" (206). Hattie's sexual relationship with Sonny-Rett is quite the opposite, not about becoming one but about power dynamics:

> When he was ready, she slowly drew him into her wonderfully complicated, inexplicable self, proving to him, as she did each time they were together, that even an ordinary, unremarkable body such as hers possessed a kind of music, its own rhythms, harmonies, tonalities, crescendos—more than one, and that, at times, her special music had the power to leave him in tears afterward on her breast. Pleasure that great. (Marshall 193)

Here, Hattie is in full control of Sonny and has the ability to become the object of his gaze. She is attempting to make him hear her body's "special music." And Hattie's power is not limited to the realm of physical interaction but also exists in the oral sphere. More than any other quality, Hattie's ability to use language grants her agency and allows her to enter the jazz discourse through her jazz moment.

THE JAZZ MOMENT

According to Ralph Ellison, "jazz is an art of individual assertion," and the "true jazz moment is as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance: spring[ing] from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity, as a link in the chain of tradition" (Ellison 234). Ellison's definition of jazz underscores three aspects that are significant for reading Hattie in the novel. First, jazz as an art of individual assertion denotes an action on the part of the individual in the form of a statement, declaration, or affirmation. Second, although distinct, the jazz moment of assertion is, in essence, a performance that connotes an audience or spectators. Third, the performance of assertion defines individuals' identity in relation to themselves, to people collectively, and to a larger extent to the tradition in which they participate—the jazz tradition. Thus, the insertion of a jazz moment into literature would involve individuals declaring, joining, affirming, or claiming rights over something in a moment that defines that identity in relation to the collectivity and as part of a larger generational trajectory.

Characterized by a pattern of fragmentation, reconfiguration, and assertion, the jazz moment is ultimately a moment of improvisation—sudden, unexpected, yet calculated, since the jazz figure experiencing the moment has prepared for it all throughout his/her life. It is a psychological moment of otherworldliness as past memories are yoked to present realities. It is also a moment of self-assertion, as characters define themselves and their identities in an attempt to achieve ultimate freedom. In this moment, the historical past replays in the mind of the character and presents past memories as fragments. The protagonist reconfigures these past memories into the reality of the moment and improvises within that moment. The improvisational moment is a moment of assertion—it occurs in the break between past memory and present reality.

At a talk given by Marc Chenard, George Lewis inquired, "Is there really nothing before you start improvising?" Chenard responded, "No. Your history, your training, your baggage is all there. Nobody starts in a total vacuum." Lewis added that the implications are far greater: "You have all the preparedness. You leap off into the void." Thus, improvisation in music is not about creating out of thin air but rather about preparing so that one has the ability to create. Hattie has spent years preparing for this moment. Sonny-Rett's brother, Edward Payne, writes to Hattie to request her attendance at the memorial concert, highlighting her relationship to Sonny, which is outsung only by her relationship to the music itself: "You were the one closest to my brother's work from the beginning and you, more than anyone else, including the critics, understood what he was attempting to do and say with his music" (Marshall 26). As a jazz pianist in the 1940s, Sonny-Rett created a "new kind of music" (Marshall 137) that can be associated with the bebop era, and Hattie's singular ability to understand what Sonny was attempting to say with his music testifies to her intimate knowledge of both the artist and his music. From her work at the record shop to her countless conversations with Sonny-Rett and her relationship with Sonny-Rett and Cherisse as lover and manager, she is more than prepared to give a full account of his life by translating his music into language.

Marshall constructs Hattie as a figure who represents jazz, and her jazz moment of improvisation is written into the narrative as a complex event that allows readers to understand the life stories behind the music. Hattie's jazz moment is captured within a symphonic rendering of the music that alludes to the breaks, solos, and improvisatory nature that defined jazz music in the late 1940s. Yet the life stories are told through a female lens, thereby establishing the black female as an archival body for jazz music, history, and memory.

Hattie's jazz moment of improvisation happens through a series of vignettes that are in dialogue with the music. The vignettes, told in a doubling manner, preface Sonny-Rett's seven hit recordings. She speaks words aloud for the audience to hear, while some stories remain personal memories. Thus, even as she is onstage

during the memorial concert, Hattie pursues "a counterpoint of other memories that were not for the public's ear as she spoke" (Marshall 183). The ambiguity between the spoken and the unspoken allows the tension to rise and fall through the music and in the narrative. The story is ultimately layered like jazz—what is spoken aloud is only at the tip of the iceberg, with much more hidden beneath the surface. We ultimately learn that every tune Sonny-Rett ever played was a song about his life, echoing Amiri Baraka's contention that "the song and the people is the same" (191) and that the people delineate their stories through the music—in this case, both literally and figuratively. Most significant here are the performance aspects, in which Hattie must embody the music and become the bearer of much more than Sonny-Rett's life. Hattie is a part of the band, much like a female vocalist, and must learn how to play with and against the band by mastering the art of call-and-response.

The concert begins with "Sonny-Rett plays Sonny" and "Basically Bach, Basically Blue," the two hits for which he was most famous. The music is followed by a memory from Hattie: "Once applause died, Hattie had stepped to the lectern, the stage lights over the band had dimmed and a single bright cone of light came to focus on her as she opened the folder containing her notes" (Marshall 181). The lights, bright over her head and dimmed over the band, suggest that she will perform the solo. When Hattie steps to the lectern, the oral tradition is suffused into the musical break. In "Improvisation and the Creative Process," Albert Murray defines the break as a "disruption of the normal cadence of a piece of music" (112). He continues,

> The break is a device that is used quite often and always has to do with the framework in which Improvisation takes place. The break is an extremely important device both from the structural point of view and from its implications. It is precisely this disjuncture that is the moment of truth. It is on the break that you "do your thing." the moment of greatest jeopardy is your moment of greatest opportunity. This is the heroic moment.… [I]t is when you establish your identity; it is when you write your signature on the epidermis of actuality.… [T]hat is how you come to terms with the void. (112)

Murray posits the break as a disruption as well as a departure from the norm. This "disjuncture" resembles what Ralph Ellison describes as the "jazz moment." Within the moment of truth/jazz moment, identity is achieved, and notions of individual freedom and agency are asserted. Murray maintains that the break is a point in jazz music where soloists sign their names on the epidermis of life.

Hattie's narrative fills each break between the musical selections. Her solo is further identified on the page with a literal symbol that distinguishes her private

memory and the life stories heard by the audience. Within these narrative breaks that are not spoken aloud, we are privy to Hattie's identity and the truth behind her relationship with Sonny-Rett, Cherisse, and ultimately the jazz tradition. The entire memorial concert can be read through the lens of Freytag's pyramid (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement), thus merging the literary and musical aspects of the text.

In the first break (the exposition), we find the reprise of "that Sunday in '47 when Everett Carlyle Payne was given a chance to sit in with the house band and what happened within these very same walls when he finished putting a hurtin' on the hokey doke tune" (Marshall 182). Hattie's private thoughts, found in her "counterpoint" solo, introduce the supportive role that she and Cherisse played in Sonny-Rett's life while he climbed the ladder of success: "Whenever he played, she and Cherisse were there also" (183). Hattie disbanded her all-girl group, the Maconettes, after Cherisse lost interest and chose a life with Sonny-Rett. Both women were "seated as close as possible to the bandstand" (Marshall 183) wherever he played. Hattie was there to give him her opinion—"the only one that mattered"—and Cherisse was there with the "milk chocolate perfection of her face" (Marshall 183) as a spectacle. In the break, we also learn that the three of them were "inseparable" (Marshall 184). At this moment in 1946, Hattie's identity was defined in relation to Sonny-Rett. Hattie was his mentor and manager, "handling [his] affairs while he was still local, negotiating the terms of the many little gigs that came his way, seeing to it that he got to the night club on the right night at the right time, and looking after the money for him. That above else" (184). In this moment in the break, Sonny-Rett's identity is defined in relation to Hattie.

As she recalls these memories in the narrative breaks, she is still "recounting the public saga" (Marshall 185) to the audience. Thus, the private and public memories intertwine with musical titles to create a lyrical medley of Hattie's life with Sonny-Rett and Cherisse. When Hattie mentions "Basically Bach, Basically Blue," the public narrative tells us that "Europe came calling," and she goes on to describe the various invitations Sonny-Rett received to play at international jazz festivals and his eagerness to find a place where he could "breathe and create without a lot of hassle" (Marshall 185). In her private memory, she delves deeper into the underlying meaning of *hassle* as she describes the racism he endured in the South as well as the North. Thus "Basically Bach, Basically Blue" speaks to the jazz musician's dilemma in the late 1940s, when even famous and wealthy African Americans still suffered under to Jim Crow laws and at the hands of the KKK.

In the next narrative break, Hattie introduces Sonny-Rett's two major hits in Europe, "The Crossing" and "Euphoria," which can be read as the rising action both in terms of her narrative about Sonny's life and within the compositional arrangement of the memorial concert. The fine line that exists between her personal and public memories remains intact. "The Crossing" provides the background for

her private memory about her communication with Cherisse through letters, which included postscripts from Sonny-Rett encouraging her to come to Europe. By the time the band finishes "Euphoria," we learn that Hattie indeed traveled to Europe, and she, Cherisse, and Sonny-Rett were happier than ever, the "triangle intact again" (Marshall 189). Hattie "expanded on the theme of the tune" (Marshall 189) as she discusses publicly the rise of jazz in Europe as a euphoric experience. Hattie moves back and forth from the lectern to her chair, detailing both the public and private memories of the next three compositions, "4th Century BC Stomp," "In the Upper Room," and "Ptite Jojo" (the climax). Her public memory of being on the road with Sonny-Rett, juxtaposed with her private memory of an intimate relationship with him and her giving birth to the idea of a baby. The intermission within the narrative also serves as a literal break, with an entirely new chapter starting afterward.

Marshall then introduces more tunes: "Continental Free Fall," "Sodom and Gomorrah Days and Nights," and "Sonny-Rett Plays Sonny … Reprise" (199). A distinct change occurs in Hattie's tone: "She began speaking this time in a surprisingly flat, factual, voice about the jazz scene in Europe, how it started to change around the mid-sixties, especially in France" (200). This shift not only signals the falling action but calls our attention to what is being said. Hattie, for the first time, riffs on the period and inserts herself as a subject to explain that jazz was 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. Stealing our stuff" (200). Before ending her public discourse, she tells the members of the audience that they can hear "the long free-fall" in Sonny-Rett's final compositions, "Continental Free Fall" and "Sodom and Gomorrah Days and Nights" (201). Hattie then closes the "folder with her notes (she had scarcely consulted them all evening) and return[s] to her seat" (201). This last line before we enter her personal memory posits Hattie as an improviser. Although the notes are in front of her, she knows the life story behind the music by heart, not just because she knew and understood Sonny-Rett but because his life story was hers. Hattie's jazz moment inscribes her own story into the traditional narrative of a once-famous jazz musician. The literal breaks found throughout the memorial concert dedicated to Hattie's personal memory create jazz moments that define her identity, provide her with agency, and inscribe her personal story as part of the life stories behind the music.

At the end of Hattie's personal narrative, we are left with "Sonny-Rett Plays Sonny … Reprise" (Marshall 199), which can be read as the denouement. The Tin Pan Alley tune, transformed again but this time into a "tender, complex, and eloquent New Orleans processional dirge out to the burial ground. His tenor, with its natural sweetness, not only bringing home Sonny-Rett Payne, born Everett Carlyle, Ulene's boychild, but also bidding him a respectful and loving farewell, putting him to rest properly on native ground" (209). Thus, by the end of the

memorial concert, Sonny-Rett is buried within the proper national and matrilineal context.

Call-and-Response

In one of the most telling jazz scenes in *The Fisher King*, Hattie Carmichael relates the tale about how Everett Carlyle Payne became Sonny-Rett Payne:

> It was the first time he got a chance to sit in with the band.… Something Abe Kaiser had started called Sunday Jazz at the Putnam Royal. And of all things, he decided to play some hokey-doke, Tin Pan Alley tune called "Sonny Boy Blue." … [F]rom the very first chord it was "Sonny Boy Blue" like it had never been played before.… That tune … didn't have nothing to do with Tin Pan Alley or Broadway when he laid into it. Nobody we knew, certainly nobody from Brooklyn had ever played piano like that.… We couldn't believe what we were hearing.… Sat there … like we were in church and weren't supposed to clap. Everybody Spellbound.… Until Alvin jumped up all of a sudden and started shouting "Sonny-Rett! Sonny-Rett! Sonny Rett!" And pointing to him up on the bandstand with the hand he had left.… Your brother took that sappy little tune, put a hurtin' on it like Shades said, and made it his tune, his song, Alvin understood that and made it part of his name. (Marshall 80)

In this passage, the narrative perspective is gendered female. We follow Sonny's rebirth through Hattie's eyes. The passage demonstrates the breadth and depth of Hattie's knowledge about jazz music, including different musical periods and chord changes. Hattie describes the crowd as silent, dumbfounded by Sonny-Rett's musical composition. In his jazz moment of improvisation, Sonny-Rett takes a tune and makes it his own. His new name and his new identity are a combination of the blues and his new way of playing jazz. The passage not only renames Everett Payne but also extends the jazz tradition to include a female voice that knows the music well enough to translate and transcend its social, structural, and gendered boundaries. In her jazz moment, Hattie takes the narrative of Sonny-Rett's genesis and makes it her own.

The song that generates both Sonny-Rett's and Hattie's jazz moments echoes James Baldwin's jazz short story, "Sonny's Blues" (1957), and Marshall responds to Baldwin's call by presenting a narrative that highlights rather than obscures the female voice. Robert B. Stepto's call-and-response theory can help us

explore further how Marshall's jazz novel can be read as a response to the literary call for black women improvisers in jazz literature. While both Sonny-Rett Payne and Baldwin's Sonny are affected by jazz music, Baldwin's narrative fails to underscore the depth to which women were involved in the jazz musician's life. Baldwin's text is told through the male perspective (via Sonny's brother), whereas in Marshall's text, Sonny-Rett's brother relinquishes all authority to a woman. Although both Baldwin and Marshall set their narratives during the heyday of jazz and the bebop era, Baldwin uses Harlem as his main setting, while Marshall extends our understanding of the place and space of the music by locating her characters in Brooklyn, a lesser-known but equally productive locale for jazz music. The life and music of Sonny-Rett Payne not only echo "Sonny's Blues" but also extend the boundaries of that story by narrating it through the black female voice and highlighting the black female as improviser and innovator in tandem with the male improviser. If Baldwin depicts the absence of family within "Sonny's Blues" (in which both Sonny and his father lose brothers to interracial violence), Marshall reconstructs the family in a complex way by defining Hattie Carmichael as "fathermothersisterbrother" (16). Marshall ultimately positions a magnifying lens on the silenced portions of Baldwin's jazz short story and re-creates a narrative that details not only why Sonny experienced his (down) fall but also how and who bears responsibility. Further, Marshall expounds on other parts of Baldwin's narrative, such as the international reach of the music, by recounting the story through a transnational lens. Finally, Marshall revises the narrative time span of the music. Rather than relegate the story to the late 1940s, she pushes it beyond into the 1970s to detail the music's longevity through generations of black women.

The narrative organization of *The Fisher King* can be read through the lens of a jazz performance—what John Szwed calls the "musical social organization" of jazz:

> Jazz has a distinctive musical social organization in performance. Jazz musicians play against as well as with other jazz musicians, working one rhythm or melody against another competitively but also reciprocally. It's what Ralph Ellison called the cruel contradiction implicit in the music, the individual finding personal identity against and with the group. Individual musicians assert themselves in solos, but other musicians may enter into each other's solos, not so much as an interruption but as a gesture of support and attentiveness. Jazz at its most complex—say, during collectively improvised playing—calls on the musicians to play with unique voices, to sound like no one else, and yet at the same time to cohere as one, with a single goal. (56–57)

The musical organization of jazz serves as a metaphor for the narrative construction of Marshall's text. For Ellison, antagonistic cooperation is defined as playing with and against the group, simultaneously occupying a space as an individual and as part of the collective. An individual may survive on and because of "shit, grit, and mother wit" (Ellison 176), but that individual's being always exists in relation to others, especially as with regard to jazz group dynamics. Moreover, jazz musicians are encouraged to "tell the story," and that ability is central to *The Fisher King* narrative, as Hattie riffs on the improvised oral narrative of the life stories behind the music. All of the women in the novel use their own melodies or voices to detail their stories of love, family, and loss. These stories are directly related to the underlining narrative rhythm of the jazz tradition.

Transposing the jazz lens onto Marshall's novel allows readers to view the text within the confines of a new genre, the Caribbean American jazz novel. The jazz ethos is transplanted onto a cultural space, thereby allowing all the women in the text to become part of jazz discourse through their individual stories. Reading the novel through a jazz lens also allows us to see how the life stories behind the music engage a community of women. The jazz lens creates a sense of innovation and possibility for the female subject to obtain agency and identity by redefining jazz discourse through untold life stories.

Marshall's bold attempt to appropriate jazz discourse testifies to her own Wild Woman status. Resisting the boundaries of both gender and culture, Marshall claims the übermasculine jazz tradition and allows Hattie to improvise an identity within that framework to create "her special music." That jazz plays such a significant role in the novel for Hattie demonstrates not only jazz's malleability but also Marshall's creativity, transforming the novel into a revisionist text that responds to the call of the absent black female voice in jazz literature. Marshall ultimately affirms that modern jazz possesses an obscured femininity and a diasporic cultural identity that have yet to enter the discourse.

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