

June 2017

## "You have permission to do this" : John Keene Reflects on Paule Marshall's Influence

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### Recommended Citation

Keene, John (2017) "'You have permission to do this" : John Keene Reflects on Paule Marshall's Influence," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol14/iss1/3>

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I first encountered Paule Marshall's work when I read *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as an undergraduate. Her depiction of Bajan immigrants in 1930s New York was very different from my own experience, but I found myself drawn to her nuanced depiction of the main character Selina. I identified closely with Selina's difficult and defiant trajectory from childhood through young adulthood. Moreover, Marshall's complex portrait of the novel's Black family deeply influenced my sense of what a writer, especially a Black writer, might explore in a novel. Marshall's linguistic artistry and use of multiple registers still resonate for me. I was becoming a fan, but also studying at her feet—or pages, as it were.

Marshall began teaching in NYU's graduate Creative Writing program the year I began, in 1995. I cannot remember if I knew she was joining the faculty, but when I saw that she would be leading fiction workshops, I was so excited study with her, and prayed I would be able to enroll in her workshop. Once in it, I learned that the correct pronunciation of her first name was "Paul," not "Paul-lee." In person, she was "proper," as they say, quickly establishing authority around the workshop table; she was an incisive reader and editor, but also generous and warm in her own way. She utilized a very helpful system for evaluating students' submitted fiction, one that I have continued to use to this day. She broke each story down into what worked and what could use some work. Some workshop teachers dispense *bons mots* and nuggets of wisdom, while others model how to read and improve others' work, and how to conduct a classroom. Marshall was definitely the latter. I submitted one story that I now realize was somewhat out there compared to what my classmates were writing, entitled "My Son, My Heart, My Life;" it focused on a queer pre-teen whose beloved older brother had been killed and who was struggling to make sense of the world around him. I was not sure how Marshall would receive it, but she took it in stride and offered excellent suggestions on how to improve it. As a result, I was able to publish that story while still in graduate school.<sup>1</sup>

A story I remember her sharing with our workshop class: She told us that when she was young she traveled on a U.S.-sponsored literary tour to Europe with Langston Hughes and William Melvin Kelley, who was also a young, up-and-coming African American writer at the time. I may have been the only person in the class who had heard of Kelley, and also perhaps the only person who was excited to imagine Hughes, Marshall, and Kelley hanging out together overseas! Kelley returned to the U.S. at some point during the tour, leaving only Marshall and Hughes, who, she hinted, would go out at night after she went to bed, and get up to

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<sup>1</sup> "My Son, My Heart, My Life," *Ploughshares* 22.1, Spring 1996. Subsequently published in *Shade: A New Anthology of Black Gay Male Writing*. Eds. Bruce Morrow and Charles Rowell. New York: Avon Books, 1996. Also published in *Best American Gay Fiction Volume Two*. Ed. Brian Bouldrey. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1997.

all kinds of things I think he may have shared with her the next day. Her anecdote about Hughes was one of many inspirations for a story I later wrote, entitled "Blues."<sup>2</sup>

As I recall it, she said that one day she would reveal what Hughes was up to, perhaps opening a window on something we did not see in Arnold Rampersad's biography or the letters with Van Vechten and others. When she wrote her memoir, which was eventually published as *Triangular Road: A Memoir*, I was convinced that it would reveal so much more than it did. Instead, it struck me as offering only oblique views into what I imagined has been a fascinating life, though as always, the writing sparkled. Through her autobiography, I gained some new knowledge about who Marshall was, how she composed her fiction, and where her books came from.

Reflecting now, my appreciation for her deepens in ways I cannot fully articulate. For example, she published with a variety of presses, some quite small; at times it appears based primarily on the desire to share work she felt she had to write, as opposed to texts that would serve as commercial landmarks in a more traditional, conventional literary career. I think of *Reena and Other Stories*, which she published with the Feminist Press at CUNY, or *Merle: A Novella, and Other Stories*, published by Virago. Some authors, especially ones whose profile had risen as high as Marshall's, might be dissuaded from taking the less commercial path, but she did this more than once. I find that impressive, and want to spend time in the future thinking more deeply about her choices surrounding her work and what they mean within the larger contexts of Caribbean, African American, African Diasporic, and Black women's writing. I especially wish she were better known, and that younger writers talked about and invoked her work more.

My conversation with Marshall (and other influences) is ongoing, and it is both conscious and unconscious, unfolding in terms of content and form. To give one example, *Annotations* might be an African American queer man's post-modern rejoinder to *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, just as *Counternarratives* is in some ways directly influenced by and resuscitating a conversation with *Soul, Clap Hands and Sing*. That collection in particular dazzled me; its daring really has not been accounted for in our critical literature. In generic (genre) and formal terms, Marshall published novels, novellas, and stories, and though she never said to me, "You have permission to do this," her example is one I realize I have been following (though she is far more prolific than I have ever been). None of this may be obvious in my finished work, but if one looks the clues are all there. Perhaps I should quote her in a future book to make it clearer; maybe I will!

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<sup>2</sup> "Blues," in *Counternarratives*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2015.