

THE PASSAGE BACK: CULTURAL APPROPRIATION  
AND INCORPORATION IN PAULE MARSHALL'S  
*PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*

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The past bound us because we became subject to alien or hostile narratives; the present can liberate us because we can become tellers of our own tales. We celebrate an oral tradition not merely because it is oral or because it is traditional. We celebrate because the tradition we claim is one of triumphant survival.<sup>1</sup>

Paule Marshall's joyous novel *Praisesong for the Widow* chronicles the journey of Avey Johnson as she connects to a past she thought she had buried. *Praisesong for the Widow* is a *Bildungsroman*, but it is also much more than that. It is a celebration in the best tradition of African societies of an African-American woman's coming of age. Paule Marshall has incorporated and appropriated (and even rejected) both African and Euro-American iconography and mythology to create a new ritual most suitable for her protagonist: a middle-class, African-American widow. The blending of "Old" and "New" Worlds is nowhere as vibrant as it is in the religions of the Caribbean, and Avey, by participating the Beg Pardon, is able to bring a sense of that heritage back with her to the United States.

Much of the literature on Marshall's remarkable novel has naturally focussed on the rituals that dominate *Praisesong for the Widow* and on the connections between Africa (especially West Africa) and the "New World" that Marshall is obviously establishing. Velma Pollard, for example, writes of the connections between the "Africa" as it survives in the Caribbean islands and North America.<sup>2</sup> The connections she forges represent a necessary step in understanding Avey's transformation to griot, but Pollard's analysis lacks a recognition of Avey's heritage on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in New York.

Barbara Christian has also written extensively on *Praisesong for the Widow*, and a number of the points she raises are pertinent to this paper. In an article entitled "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*,"<sup>3</sup> Christian discusses the necessary juxtaposition of past and present in the novel and describes it as a source of wisdom. The juxtaposition stems from the "history of the forced displacement of blacks in the West" (Christian 1983, 75); Avey must integrate the memories (of the rituals of her early

married life) that disrupt her vacation with the rituals she experiences in the "present" of Grenada and Carriacou. As she remembers the old rituals and participates in new (or different) ones, she reconnects with her personal and social history, and gains a new wisdom that frees her from the pain and emptiness of her recent life.

In a second article, "Paule Marshall: A Literary Biography,"<sup>4</sup> Christian discusses the development and characteristics of Marshall's work. One important characteristic is the emergence of female protagonists within the context of a rich black culture, not in opposition to a hostile white society (Christian 1985, 104). Part of that emergence suggests the idea of a *Bildungsroman*, and while Marshall's work could certainly be characterized that way, *Praisesong for the Widow*, at least, appropriates the conventional Western notion of the *Bildungsroman* using elements from traditional African tales of rites of passage and creates a complex tale that is all her own.

Finally, in a third article, "'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something': African-American Women's Historical Novels,"<sup>5</sup> Christian discusses recent historical novels that deal with the unspoken and previously unacknowledged aspects of slavery and the African-American past. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, that past continually intrudes, and Avey must face it before she can move into the future. The acknowledgement of a slave memory implies a time (a history) in Africa (Christian 1990, 332-333); Marshall incorporates that memory gracefully and elegantly into *Praisesong for the Widow* and into Avatara's new life.

Abena Busia discusses similar issues in two articles, "Words Whispered over Voids: A Context for Black Women's Rebellious Voices in the Novel of the African Diaspora" and "What Is Your Nation?: Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*."<sup>6</sup> In the first of these articles, Busia defines four strategies for cultural redefinition<sup>7</sup>, and argues that what makes *Praisesong for the Widow* such a strong novel is the incorporation of ritual and other elements of African oral traditions in what she calls a "progressive" way (Busia 1988, 26):

The aim is not to romanticize Africa or the lot of the African woman, as if the way to cure all present ills were to re-create the societies of the past; the past is not reclaimed for its own sake but because, without a recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future. (Busia 1988, 26-27)

The task that Marshall takes on is a reclamation of the past in much the same way that Busia envisions it; at the same time, Marshall transplants

the concept to American soil: Avey must recapture the value of her life on Halsey Street and use the "fruits of their labor" in North White Plains to create a future that has meaning in America, not Africa. Avey herself is a griot, inheriting the story of the Ibos and passing it on. She is also a griot for her own life (as a protagonist who tells her own story), and, I will argue, she thus becomes a figure transplanted from the African continent and transformed for the American continent, a model—an avatar—for her society.

One of the concepts Busia coins which is useful for understanding *Praisesong for the Widow* is "diaspora literacy" (Busia 1989, 197). Marshall fills the text of *Praisesong for the Widow* with cultural references from African-America, Africa, and the Caribbean, and readers will understand and interpret the text differently depending on their ability to recognize those references. Busia asserts that Avey, too, must acquire diaspora literacy—using the African past to understand the Caribbean present and sustain the American future (Busia 1988, 26):

Marshall articulates the scattering of the African peoples as a trauma—a trauma that is constantly repeated anew in the lives of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which Afro-Americans have to live, the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots, and, as Avey learns to her cost, this is tantamount to a repetition, in her private life, of the original historical separation. (Busia 1989, 197)

This is the juxtaposition that Christian describes. It is the memory that disrupts Avey's existence and sets her on the path to re-integration. It is the joy and the sorrow of African-American culture, in addition to the heritage of Africa, that Avey must learn if she is to take up her role as avatar and griot.

#### *Praisesong for the Widow* as a Rite of Passage

In most African societies, the incorporation into adulthood is marked by an initiation or a rite of passage. When children reach puberty, they are removed from their families and enter a special (often secret) school, where they are educated into the duties, morals, and customs of the society; boys and girls go to separate schools. Before the society allows them to return, it requires them to pass certain tests; once the initiates complete the tests, the community welcomes them back as adults, with all the rights and responsibilities attendant to adult status.

At these ceremonies, the griot often sings or performs the praisesongs of the society, which Busia defines as follows:

Praise songs are traditional African heroic poems, sung in various communities over the entire continent. They embrace all manner of elaborate poetic form, but are always specifically ceremonial, social poems, intended to be recited or sung in public at anniversaries and other celebrations, including the funerals of the great. Praise songs may embrace the history, myths, and legends of a whole people, or their representative(s), and they can be used to celebrate communal triumph, the greatness of rulers, or the nobility of the valiant and brave, whether in life or death. They can also be sung to mark social transition; as part of a rite of passage, they mark the upward movement of a person from one group to the next. (Busia 1988, pp. 21-22)

Marshall's novel is praisesong commemorating the initiation of Avey, the griot and the woman.

Tales from African societies<sup>8</sup> reflect their rites and initiations. Rites-of-passage narratives can be divided into three phases which reflect the actual phases of the initiation/education: separation, trial, and re-integration or re-incorporation. The separation and re-integration phases both take place in the known, natural world of the village. In the separation phase, the hero/ine leaves the home village and enters the forest or bush, where s/he must undergo—and pass—tests of wo/manhood; by overcoming certain obstacles, the hero/ine passes the test and earns the respect of the community, which welcomes her/him back with honors and celebration. The trial phase, however, is remarkable for its liminal characteristics. The hero/ine moves between the natural and supernatural worlds in the bush, often encountering a supernatural figure (usually a monster or other frightening creature, but in some cases it can be a trickster figure). The supernatural figure creates obstacles for the hero/ine, who must overcome them or die. The hero/ine, because of special qualities, *does* overcome the obstacles and acquires extraordinary skills as well.

Avey Johnson's story in *Praisesong for the Widow* is exactly a tale of a rite of passage. The separation, however, takes place before the novel even begins: when Avey and Jay move to North White Plains, they symbolically sever their ties with the community that sustained them throughout most of their childhood and early married life. Avey, in particular, loses her connection to the summers she spent either in Tatem with her Great-aunt Cuney or with her parents (and the African-American community) on the steamship *Robert Fulton*. Avey

only becomes aware of the separation during the course of the novel, when she leaves the cruise ship *Bianca Pride* because of a disturbing dream depicting a brawl with her Great-aunt Cuney. Her dream triggers memories and more dreams of the life before North White Plains, and although Avey might not yet realize it, the readers are aware that she must reconnect with that life in order to get rid of the nausea that has plagued her since the peach parfait.

Avey's decision to leave the *Bianca Pride* represents another separation, of course. A cruise on the "*White*" *Pride* is a logical vacation for someone who lives in a place called North White Plains. But for Avey, the lifestyle epitomized by the *Bianca Pride* has made her a stranger to herself. At dinner in the Versailles room, she looks in the mirrors and sees her friends Thomasina Moore and Clarice, but "for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls seated with them."<sup>9</sup> Her estrangement from her own image has been taking place since the move to North White Plains; in assuming the trappings and rituals of white American capitalism, she has abandoned the "self" she knew in Halsey Street. She has tried to assimilate into a society from which she is categorically excluded. Her estrangement from her own self parallels her invisibility in that society:

As usual, even [the diners] who sat directly facing her at the nearby tables somehow gave the impression of having their backs turned to her and her companions. It had to do with the expression in their eyes, which seemed to pass cleanly through them whenever they glanced across, and even, ironically, with the quick strained smiles some of them occasionally flashed their way. (p. 47)

When she realizes she has lost something, her decision to abandon the alienating environment is swift and almost sure.

Avey's trial began with the move to North White Plains, but she only recognizes the obstacles that were placed in her path once she lands in Grenada, a tropical island covered (mostly) with forest—"A dark mass of coastal hills with a darker foil of mountains behind had been the first to appear" (p. 19)—a bush full of obstacles and supernatural occurrences. She begins to remember her and Jay's capitulation to American capitalism: the acquisition of the house, the collection of things in the dining room, the meticulous attention to the trappings of middle-class life (clothing, membership in lodges, the well-stocked pantry). She remembers Jerome Johnson's "harsh and joyless ethic" (p. 131) which points to his (as well as her) betrayal of their roots in the African-American community. Remembering that capitulation and

mourning the time on Halsey Street, however, suggests that she still has a chance to save herself. Although she doesn't recognize it, the first glimmer of possibility comes on the wharf in Grenada, where the out-islanders don't perceive her difference:

What was the matter with these people? It was as if the moment they caught sight of her standing there, their eyes immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of the homemade cotton prints the women were wearing. . . . Their eyes also banished the six suitcases at her side, and placing a small overnight bag like the ones they were carrying in her hand, they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going. (p. 72)

Before she can truly join the out-islanders, however, she must die, and she must mourn Jay's death, on that night in 1947 when they embarked on the road to middle-class respectability. Avey's trial is not over; she must face up to the betrayal that moving to North White Plains represented; she must repossess her memories of Halsey street and of the rituals she and Jay performed there. Finally, she crawls like an old woman off the balcony into the room, violently removes her gloves, hat, girdle, and shoes—the trappings of her middle-class excesses—throwing them across the room; "[t]hat was all she could manage before collapsing onto the bed" (p. 144). The wake is over, and Avey and Jerome Johnson have finally been put to rest.

She awakens the next morning smelling like a baby, and her excursion along the beach is filled "[w]ith a child's curiosity and awe" (p. 154). Her rebirth in the morning leaves her mind empty and makes room for the lessons and the history she has to learn before she can retake her place in the society she abandoned for North White Plains. The trial is not over, however; a trickster figure lurks on the beach, and he has taken the form of an old man, the owner of a rum-shop, Lebert Joseph.

Lebert Joseph is the incarnation of the West African deity Legba, guardian of thresholds and crossroads and a crucial link between human beings and the gods. In Caribbean religious practice, his appearance is marked by a limp.<sup>10</sup> Lebert appears from behind a screen to guard the threshold to his temple: "a stoop-shouldered old man with one leg shorter than the other limped from behind the screen of leaves, advanced as far as the counter and stood there peering irritably across at her" (p. 160). In the final stage of her trial, Avey confronts the trickster, and naturally, he frightens her. He begins to fill her mind with the history of his—and her—people, starting the process of recognition that will culminate in the Beg Pardon on Carriacou, but first he persuades (or

tricks) her into making the excursion with him to Carriacou:

The man, who from his look had known all her objections before they were even born in her thoughts, sat quietly waiting, his eyes on her. Across the way, Avey Johnson was leaning wearily against the table. She felt as exhausted as if she and the old man had been fighting . . . and that for all his appearance of frailty he had proven the stronger of the two. (p. 184)

Lebert is the link for Avey between her past, which he knows without being told, and her future, which must recognize the importance of and include the ancestors. He has the knowledge of the deity and the cunning and strength of the trickster. By acquiescing to his demands, however, Avey does not succumb to the supernatural. Lebert is not a hostile trickster; his intent is not to trip her up but to help her back over the threshold between her long trial and her future as a griot.

But still the trial is not over. On the boat to Carriacou, Avey once more purges herself of the white capitalist scourge and replays her death of the previous evening. She becomes an infant again, with the infant's inability to control its bowels or to move by itself. She must be carried like a baby to Rosalie Parvay's house, where she is bathed and massaged again like a baby, but Rosalie's actions bring about the birth of the new woman Avatara. Rosalie is the female incarnation of her father the trickster and god; she is a priestess of Avey's rebirth and reincorporation into the community. By accepting Lebert/Legba's invitation and by submitting to the ministrations of his daughter Rosalie, Avey attests that she is willing to become part of the community that she left so long ago in Halsey Street.

Like a true guide, Lebert is waiting for her at the crossroads to take her to the celebration:

the strong beam of [Rosalie's] flashlight picked out the spot a short distance ahead where another road could be seen crossing the one they were on. She paused upon reaching the spot and slowly panned the far side of the intersection with the yellowish light, until it singled out Lebert Joseph standing quietly waiting for them at the place where their road continued up the hill.

It was unmistakably him. . . . Yet for a moment Avey Johnson failed to recognize him. Her eyes must be playing tricks on her again she told herself, as they had done that last day on the *Bianca Pride*, because the man suddenly appeared older (as if such a thing were possible!) of an age beyond reckoning. . . .

That was one moment. The next—as if to confirm that she had been indeed seeing things—the crippled figure up ahead

shifted to his good leg, pulled his body as far upright as it would go (throwing off at least a thousand years as he did), and was hurrying forward with his brisk limp to take her arm. (p. 233)

Lebert's appearance is characterized by his own "liminality," his own ability to move freely between the spiritual and "real" worlds. He escorts her to the Beg Pardon, where, as Christian points out, she hears the sorrow that is part of her heritage, as the proud rejection and survival represented by the Ibos of her Great-aunt Cuney's story. She takes her place among the dancers, and Lebert stops the dancing to pay homage to the griot she has become. She at last takes upon herself the calling that Great-aunt Cuney determined for her so long ago, and introduces herself as "Avey, short for Avatara" (p. 251).

If Avey's story is a tale of her rite of passage, it is also a praisesong in the strictest sense—a poem, song, celebration, and history of Avey's passage into African-American middle age. The story of the Ibos is a praisesong, too, and Avey learns it as a griot would: from her Great-aunt, and almost unconsciously. Avey is accepted into the community as a griot; she will be passing on the history of the Ibos and of her own life and people from the "street corners and front lawns . . . of North White Plains" (p. 255).

#### Resurrection as Metaphor in *Praisesong for the Widow*

*Praisesong for the Widow* is also a tale of resurrection and redemption; Marshall incorporates Christian iconography to add another dimension to Avey's journey. The text itself is divided into four parts like the four books of the New Testament and, like much of the New Testament, is concerned with Avey's spiritual death and resurrection.

In Christian mythology, Christ's death and resurrection took place over the course of three days. In the night between Thursday and Good Friday, he was betrayed by Judas and handed over to the people who killed him on Good Friday. He was buried, but left his tomb to join his Father in Heaven. His death represents human death, and his resurrection symbolizes the union with God that takes place after the body has died.

Avey's cycle of spiritual death and rebirth begins when she decides to leave the cruise. Just as Christ left his apostles after the Last Supper, Avey decides in the middle of the night, after her experience with the peach parfait, to leave her friends, the women she always travels with, and to go ashore to catch a plane home. Christ's Gethsemane took place apart even from the apostles he brought with him; he had to face his Father alone. Avey, similarly, checks into a hotel and confronts Jerome Johnson on the balcony of her room. She

must also confront the betrayal she is about to commit against the house—again—when Jerome Johnson's ghost asks her if she knows what she's doing:

He meant the money: the fifteen hundred dollars she had just forfeited by walking off the ship; the air fare she would have to turn around and spend tomorrow; the cost of the hotel room tonight. From the anxiety in his voice, she could tell he was including other, more important things. "Do you know what you're playing around with?" said in that tone also meant the house in North White Plains and the large corner lot on which it stood, and the insurance policies, annuities, trusts and bank accounts that had been left her, as well as the small sheaf of government bonds and other securities which were now also hers, and most of all the part interest guaranteed her for life in the modest accounting firm on Fulton Street in Brooklyn which bore his name. The whole of his transubstantiated body and blood. All of it he seemed to feel had been thrown into jeopardy by her reckless act. (pp. 87-88)

Avey has become a Judas, poised on the precipice of abandoning everything that she and especially Jerome worked and *sacrificed* for. Calling up the memories of the pleasure that characterized the relationship they had on Halsey Street cannot erase the pain of the betrayal she is about to commit (both by abandoning the cruise *and* by joining the Beg Pardon on Carriacou). She is only aware of the empty opulence of their life in North White Plains *and* of the sacrifices they made to achieve it: "*Too much! Too much! Too much!*" Raging as she slept" (p. 145). It is the same empty opulence she rejected when she abandoned the *Bianca Pride*, and her cries echo Christ, who also wondered if his Father was asking too much of him. Avey's spiritual death takes place immediately after her Gethsemane, and she collapses onto the bed, giving herself up to her rage and her pain.

The next day of the Easter cycle is a day of rest. Avey, the child, wakes up and is able to rest, although not in a revitalizing manner: "Nothing crossed her drawn, spent face or stirred in her eyes. It was as if a saving numbness had filtered down over her mind while she slept to spare her the aftershock of the ordeal she had undergone last evening" (p. 151). She rests, but she is also restless; she cannot think ahead (after only being able to think the future on the ship); indeed, she cannot think at all because her mind is a *tabula rasa*. She has been reborn (the child imagery suggests as much), but according to the Christian rites of birth, she must still be baptized in order to be worthy of salvation and resurrection.

The preparation for her resurrection comes from an unlikely source: Lebert Joseph, an "Old Testament prophet chronicling the lineage of his tribe" (p. 163) in his rum shop with shadowplay reminiscent of a church, takes it upon himself to instruct Avey in the ways of the Excursion, which is also a kind of pilgrimage. He fills the *tabula rasa* of her mind with the wisdom of the tribe and the history of his chosen people, and finally convinces her to join him. Carriacou is, after all, a place of baptism, where "a man goes to relax hisself. To bathe in Carriacou water and visit 'bout with friends" (p. 164). Like Moses before him, Lebert takes her over the water to the promised land on a boat named for Christ, a boat with a crucifix on the prow. During the journey, Avey recalls another Easter and hears again the sermon she heard that Sunday when she was a little girl. The sermon places her own resurrection squarely in the tradition of Christianity by foreshadowing the third day of her stay and her encounter with the two Marys in the form of Lebert's daughter, Rosalie, and her maid: "And didn't He like He said He would rise up beloved on the the third day? . . . Then along came the two Marys to pray. And when they, poor things, saw what had happened they were what . . . ? What does the good Book say . . . ?" (p. 199)

The next day on Carriacou (the final day of the cycle of death and resurrection—Easter), Avey allows herself to be baptized by Rosalie, an Athena-like reproduction of Lebert (the prophet) himself (p. 216). Rosalie massages and anoints Avey into life, and Avey "became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again" (p. 223). The resurrection is complete when she is able to ask forgiveness at the Beg Pardon ("Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy"), and she assumes her new and old name: Avey, short for Avatara.

### Conclusion

*Praisesong for the Widow* is more than the sum of its metaphors. Marshall joins two different and in many ways opposing mythologies in a joyous and painful celebration of African-American selfhood. The novel does not completely embrace the concept of "Africa," nor does it completely reject the tenets of Christianity. Instead, they are fused in a new mythology that confronts and recognizes both the "pain and pleasure" (to use Christian's vocabulary) of being an African descendent in America.

Avey's rite of passage relies very heavily on the Christian concepts of death, rebirth, and baptism. As Velma Pollard points out,

death and birth are also central to African ritual.<sup>11</sup> Pollard also states that Marshall rejects the Western/Christian concept of baptism; however, the bathing Avey receives from Rosalie Parvay and the anointing with oil which follows suggests the opposite. Avey's bath is not a baptism in the strict sense of the word: Rosalie does not immerse her in water, but rather carefully and respectfully—one could almost say reverently—washes her body with a cloth. Rosalie is Lebert Joseph's female incarnation: "She might have sprung whole from his head, a head-birth without benefit or need of a mother; an idea made flesh" (p. 216). Her relationship to Lebert, a trickster, makes her an odd "priest," yet she is an appropriate choice, since her actions recall the actions of Mary Magdalene, who went to the tomb to wash and anoint Christ's body on the day of his resurrection. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the rituals of baptism and naming (as part of the rite of passage) are conflated in the figure of Rosalie Parvay, daughter of an African trickster and successor to Mary Magdalene.

Avey rejects the Protestant ethic as it is represented by the white, middle-class Christianity seen on the *Bianca Pride*. Her decision to leave is a direct result of the excesses of dining in the Versailles Room and of her Great-aunt's appearance in a dream. When Avey is on the launch, on her way to the wharf in Grenada, she turns around to look at the ship: "She turned only to have her eyes assaulted by what looked like a huge flash fire of megaton intensity and heat, as the tropical sunlight striking the liner's bow and sweeping over the hull appeared to have set it ablaze. She could almost feel over the distance the heat from the fires on the decks" (p. 63). In this image, the *Bianca Pride* has become an inferno, a repository for all the sins of middle-class extravagance, yet the luxury represented by the ship is precisely the luxury Avey requires to contemplate her past. She rejects the ship, though, and turns from hell; by doing so, she acknowledges her willingness to accept her own salvation and resurrection. At the same time, she is ready to take the next step in the trial she must undergo to take her place alongside her Great-aunt Cuney, the griot.

The strongest image of the novel, however, and the one that embraces the most complex iconography, is the image of crossing the water. Christian symbols and African history come together very powerfully on the *Emanuel C*, creating a new ritual for Avey and others like her. The figure who leads the way, of course, is Lebert/Legba. He is taking Avey over the last hurdle to her community; he is also Moses parting the water to lead her to the promised land. The ship itself is Christ walking on water; yet Avey loses complete control of her bodily functions, corrupting and endangering her own salvation. The figure of the saint that had been carved into the bow of the boat is eaten away, too; "[o]nly the crucifix in its hand had by some miracle remained intact.

This it held over the water as though it were a divining rod that had once led the way to a rich lode of gold" (p. 193). The trappings of Christianity are present, but they are bankrupt. They are also being supplanted by the symbolism of the African rituals: the crucifix is also a crossroad; the mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist Church are on an Excursion, and Moses has practiced deceit to get Avey to Carriacou.

Lebert the trickster puts Avey into the care of two old women who are also making the excursion. They are midwives of a sort, guiding her through the process of purgation and rebirth that takes place on the boat. They also represent figures from her childhood, and they provoke her final memory:

While her body remained anchored between the old women who were one and the same with the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet in their pews up front, her other self floated down. . . . The large, somewhat matronly handbag on her lap shrank to a little girl's pocketbook of white patent leather containing a penny for the collection plate. . . . A bow of pale blue satin that felt bigger than her head matched the Easter outfit she had on. And above the racing of the silken sea just below the railing she soon began to hear . . . the inflammatory voice from the pulpit. (p. 197)

The sermon she hears is the Easter sermon of the resurrection, and it foretells her own resurrection. But just as she did that Sunday in church, she now purges herself of her middle-class meal over the side of the *Emanuel C.* The thundering, rolling "voice from the pulpit that had become God's voice" (p. 203) is replaced by the "soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve of what was happening" (p. 205). The mothers of Mount Olivet take their places in the women on the boat and help Avey get ready for the ritual she will participate in on Carriacou.

Just as the journey over the sea to Carriacou can be compared to the journey to the other side of the Red Sea, it *must* also be compared to the journey of the slaves on the Middle Passage and to the reverse passage of the Ibos who were brought to Tatem. The Ibos, like Christ, walked on the water and rejected the world and the life they saw. Others did not have the choice. Avey's suffering calls up the ghosts of others who crossed the water but did not face resurrection:

She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and

stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence. (p. 209)

The journey of Christ and of Moses and the Israelites is transformed, and the corrupt symbols of that mythology are called upon to bear witness to the suffering of millions. History takes its place beside *and within* the religions of Africa and the West; the bankruptcy of the old mythology anticipates a space for the horror that is the inheritance of African-Americans.

Avey rejects the bankruptcy of the system she has participated in for nearly thirty years in North White Plains, but she does not embrace the mythology of her African past in the way that some might expect. If she were to make a pilgrimage to Africa, she would be romanticizing Africa in the way Busia defines and rejects; instead, she brings her experience to bear on the future of African-Americans in a way that both Busia and Christian anticipate but do not articulate. She makes plans to return to North White Plains and Tatem, where she can spread the message of the Beg Pardon:

Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers. And whenever she spotted one of them amid the crowd, those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two and three jobs, she would stop them. . . . As they rushed blindly in and out of the glacier buildings, unaware, unprotected, lacking memory and a necessary distance of the mind . . . she would stop them and before they could pull out of her grasp, tell them about the floor in Halsey Street and quote them the line from her namesake. . . . (p. 255)

The fact that Avey's "territory" is North White Plains, Manhattan, and Tatem suggests her final and extraordinary initiation. She takes up the mantle of her Great-aunt Cuney and becomes a griot, but not of the African history which is the property of the classic griot. The gospels of the New Testament take names from African rituals and history, and a *new* praisesong is written. Avey will tell the story of her past (on Halsey Street in New York) and the past of her people (on Ibo Landing in Tatem). She is Busia's protagonist who tells her own story in a *Bildungsroman*, but more than that, she is a new griot who writes the

experiences of women into the history of African-Americans.

At the end of *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey has become the kind of woman Barbara Christian means when she writes, "As we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, they remind us that if want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget" (Christian 1990, p. 341). Avey/Avatařa is truly an exemplar, testifying to the multi-faceted heritage of African-Americans.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Abena P. A. Busia, "Words Whispered Across Voids: A Context for Black Women's Rebellious Voices in the Novel of the African Diaspora," in *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Greenwood, FL: Penkevill Publishing Co., 1988), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>"Cultural Connections in Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow*," in *World Literatures Written in English*, 25, 2, 1985, pp. 285-298.

<sup>3</sup>*Callaloo*, 6, 2, Spring-Summer 1983, pp. 74-84.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Christian (ed.), *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), pp. 103-115.

<sup>5</sup>*Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andree N. McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1990), pp. 326-341.

<sup>6</sup>*Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989), pp. 16-37.

<sup>7</sup>The strategies can be easily seen in *Praisesong for the Widow*: 1) a re-validation of "Africa" (in the rituals performed on Carriacou); 2) a protagonist who tells her own story (Avey's remembering of the events of her past); 3) a conquest of physical space (the decision to return to North White Plains and especially Tatem); and 4) an examination of women's roles by exploring their bonds and families of choice (her decision to make a summer home in Tatem for her grandchildren and for Marion's "sweetest lepers"). (Busia 1988, 3-4).

<sup>8</sup>I am obliged to Donald Cosentino for the following information.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: E. P. Dutton-Obelisk, 1984), p. 48. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>10</sup>Abena Busia, "What is Your Nation: Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 204.

<sup>11</sup>"Cultural Connections in Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow*," in *World Literatures Written in English*, 25, 2, 1985, p. 296.