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DANCING UP A NATION

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong For the Widow*

by Courtney Thorsson

Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) is rightly celebrated by a number of critics for protagonist Avey Johnson's journey toward self-expression and wholeness.¹ In *Praisesong*, Marshall portrays a black woman achieving this wholeness by seizing and using her individual and collective past in terms that redefine nation. Zora Neale Hurston signals the important work done by storytellers in *Mules and Men* by noting that they are "lying up a nation" (19). Similarly establishing a homeland, Avey Johnson is dancing up a nation in the island spaces and water crossings of *Praisesong for the Widow*. As in Hurston's work, the nation Marshall charts is both imagined and real, determined by geography and a shared culture.² The dance on Carriacou, occurring in the final section of the novel and marking Avey's success as geographer of the diaspora, is the most concrete of the many manifestations of this cultural and geographical territory in *Praisesong*. The dance, the "Beg Pardon," asks ancestors to forgive the transgressions of the dancers. The dance is powerful because it relies on the individual history of each dancer and the collective history of this ritual performance, which unites the dancers in a shared diasporic culture. Marshall's depiction of the Beg Pardon theorizes a diaspora that preserves difference within unity, individuality within collectivity.³ The moment of the Beg Pardon is thus an important model of diasporic nationality. *Praisesong* is a guide to the process of articulating and joining the diasporic homeland embodied in this dance. Avey's geographic and cultural journey to the Beg Pardon, then, bears closer examination.

Avey's journey begins when, in girlhood, she witnesses dance on the fictive South Carolina Sea Island Tatem. Difference within unity marks dancing from this first instance of it in Marshall's novel. Early in *Praisesong*, Avey recalls her Aunt Cuney, "caught 'crossing her feet' in a Ring Shout" and refusing to leave the dancing for this breach of conduct. Aunt Cuney is both part of the religious ritual and distinct from it. Breaking the codes of the ring shout, Cuney is pushed out of a community of dancers. Young Avey recalls the "arms shot up, hands arched like wings" of dancers in the ring (33). When Avey reenacts just these movements years later, in her sixties, thousands of miles away, she effectively restores not just her place but Cuney's as well, in the community she observed in her girlhood.

Like Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange, Marshall uses the Sea Islands as a space both real and imagined. This imaginative vision allows these authors, through fiction, to provide an answer to Countee Cullen's question "What is Africa to me?" By writing an African-informed space as a seat of feminine power specifically useful for black American women, these authors are able to get away from problematic, primitivizing, or essential-

izing uses of Africa. Like Hurston's anthropological writings, these authors' novels are deeply invested in specifics and diversity of African Americans and their varied African inheritances. Accordingly, those on the excursion to Carriacou represent many nations of African origin, each with its own dance. This work of treating Africa as historically grounded and of dismantling stereotypes of Africa as a timeless monolith clearly still needs attention in the late twentieth century. Marshall and her contemporaries use the Sea Islands as a bridge, a sacred space, from which to do this work.

The further Avey strays from Tatem, the further she is from a cultural nationalism or diasporic consciousness that allows her to feel at home. Marshall introduces Avey in this state of unease, long after her last visit to Tatem, when she is figuratively homeless. According to Lebert Joseph, whom she meets in Grenada after abandoning her annual Caribbean cruise with friends, Avey is one of the "People who can't call their nation." Joseph leads her to Carriacou, site of the Beg Pardon and Big Drum dances. Joining an annual excursion to this island off the coast of Grenada, Avey learns to answer the question that haunts the novel: "What's your nation?" (167). Carriacou and the cleansing journey to the island are, like childhood boat rides on the Hudson River and visits to Tatem, important sites of identification for Avey. These journeys host her sense of community and connection to others. Water crossings and island geography, both exceeding national boundaries, are home to Avey. Marshall's map of Avey's nation is a collection of islands: Martinique on the cruise, Grenada as first site of her escape, Carriacou, Tatem, and Manhattan, where she spends the first year of her marriage. Travel across water acts as a vessel for collective history as well, as evidenced by Avey's visions of the middle passage on the boat ride to Carriacou. Avey's homeland holds the history, here the violence of slavery, that nation often cannot account for or suppresses. Avey's travels map her nation in a reworking of the term nation that disassociates it from the state and marks the islands and waters of the African Diaspora as a nation unto themselves. Carriacou, like many of the Sea Islands, is a place "That they don' even bother putting on the map" (77). By being unmarked, known only to those who call it home, Carriacou becomes a free space, outside documentation, and not on the map of any nation. Avey can thus make it part of the same geographical space that includes Tatem. Her collection of islands exceeds national boundaries but forms a diasporic island homeland built on individual and collective pasts.

Marshall's unification of individual and community is crucial, as is the unification of mind and body for Avey's performance of a Juba-style dance on Carriacou. In her article "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," Barbara Christian writes, "The recurrent motif throughout the novel, that the body might be in one place and the mind in another, is characterized not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom, stemming from a history that forced displacement of blacks in the West" (75). Audre Lorde, on the other hand, demands unification of mind and body in her essay "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde describes "dancing" as one manifestation of the "creative energy empowered" that women must reclaim in uniting mind and body (55). Both critics are right. Avey Johnson can sort through her past only by mentally leaving her body on several occasions in the novel. As Christian notes, in the section titled "Sleeper's Wake," the action occurs in Avey's mind while her body is in a Grenadian hotel (77). With her mind free to travel, Avey recalls her life, including sacred moments like childhood boat rides on the Hudson River, visits to Tatem, and dancing in the living room with her husband,

Jay. A temporary disconnect between Avey's mind and body is, as Christian suggests, an important tool that allows Avey to sift through her history to gather up a usable past. Key to this usable past, however, is a reunification with the erotic, as Lorde would define it, particularly in Avey's recollections of the physical sensation of "threads" that connected her to all the others riding on boats up the Hudson (190) and of making love with Jay early in their marriage, an act which turned her to an African goddess: "Erzulie [. . .] Yemoja [. . .] Oya [. . .]" (127).

Through separation from and reunification with her body, Avey establishes a whole self built on the small rituals of her history. Having found what she needed in her individual past, Avey is ready to access a collective past—and she locates it partly at Ibo Landing. Ibo Landing is one crucial space of a collective past in *Praisesong*. The sacredness of Ibo Landing confers importance to other sites of transit and travel across water in the novel. Enslaved Africans looked into their future at the landing on Tatem, and, rejecting the abuses that awaited them in the New World, turned around and walked on water back to Africa. Susan Rogers reads faith in the Ibos' story of walking back to Africa as crucial to diasporic connection. Rogers writes that Aunt Cuney's "faith amounts to a literal belief in the Ibos' story, the belief that it is possible to defy the body's limitations and, in so doing, to escape the bonds of enslavement" (80). For Rogers, Avey's adulthood dream of fighting with Aunt Cuney signifies, in part, a struggle over whether to believe in the story of Ibo Landing (80). Avey's return to Tatem, promised at the close of the novel, will consolidate her inheritance of possibility and power from this story, which she finally accepts as true. Like Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, the story of Ibo Landing implicitly documents the violence of slavery in the United States and functions as a shared archive with each telling of the story. Implicitly demanding that Avey retell the story of Ibo Landing, Aunt Cuney "had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill" (42).

Avey must undergo many water crossings, including moving from Manhattan to Brooklyn (a setback because she loses the community she and Jay find in Harlem), annual Caribbean cruises, and, finally, the small boat from Grenada to Carriacou, to name and find this "mission." The mission turns out to be recognizing her "nation" as the African Diaspora and sharing this recognition with others. Most critics focus on the role of griot suggested by her full name, Avatara, as central to this mission.⁴ Avatara signals "avatar," which the OED defines as, "The descent of a deity to earth in incarnate form" or "manifestation in human form." For my purposes, Avey's role as griot is less central than her role as "manifestation" or model of a new mode of cultural nationalism or diasporic consciousness. It is indeed crucial that Avey decides at novel's end to spread the foundational story of this consciousness; the work of *Praisesong* is primarily to demonstrate how such a consciousness is formed.⁵ Avey's name also suggests the stakes of adopting such a dynamic cultural nationalism by referencing Jean Toomer's short story "Avey," from his work *Cane*. Toomer's narrator imagines Avey as a woman who has no place in the world because "an art that would open the way for women the likes of her has yet to be born" (46). In positing dancing as that "art" in *Praisesong*, Marshall makes room for the creative power of black women who, as Toomer suggests of Avey and Marshall declares of her heroine, are simultaneously ordinary and special. Further, Marshall makes her Avey the agent of her tale, restoring the narrative power denied Toomer's Avey by the lover who

romantically imagines his own idea of the woman. Marshall's Avey assumes the power denied her namesake by participating as storyteller of a new diasporic consciousness.

This mission unconsciously underlies Avey's whole life, as evidenced by her husband Jay's recitation of Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Jay recites not those lines of this poem that refer to the Mississippi River or New Orleans, but the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile (125). In refusing those lines that refer to American spaces and emphasizing those that speak of African rivers, Marshall uses Hughes as a means of Africanizing the small, domestic ritual of poetry recitation in Jay and Avey's home. This model of connection to an African heritage, with Marshall increasing the specificity that Hughes's poem only begins to attain, allows Avey to recognize her diasporic lineage. When the couple stops reciting African American poetry, playing blues and jazz records, and dancing in the living room, they lose the "small rituals that had once shaped their lives" (137). Avey later realizes these rituals are incredibly important to maintaining the sense of self she rediscovers in her island dance, largely because they connected her to a cultural diaspora that reached well beyond the couple's home.

As always in Marshall, these moments of connection are both individual and communal. Communal in the sense of participating in a diaspora articulated by Hughes's poem and individual in the sense that this participation takes place in the very intimate context of Avey and Jay's marriage. The two modes are absolutely inseparable in *Praisesong*. Jane Olmsted writes, "the loss of a loving ritual represents a separation from lineage that depends on memories and stories of subsequent generations" (261). The "loving rituals" of dancing in the living room and reciting poetry are just as important to participation in "lineage" as Avey's more public participation in the Big Drum dances on Carriacou. The small, domestic rituals are crucial to shaping Avey's local notion of home that will eventually inform her notion of community and nation. Olmsted refers to "generations" because though Avey has missed the opportunity with her own daughter, her grandchildren will act as culture bearers if Avey passes on the private and public rituals that create nation in this novel.

Echoing the power resonant in Avey's home, Marshall describes the force of creative expression from women in highly local, often domestic, contexts in her essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen." Marshall writes:

I grew up among poets. Now they didn't look like poets—whatever that breed is supposed to look like. Nothing about them suggested that poetry was their calling. They were just a group of ordinary housewives and mothers, my mother included [...] they talked—endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. (24)

Marshall hears one form of what Alice Walker calls "our mothers' gardens" in this "talk." In an all-female group and the space of the kitchen, these, Barbadian in this case, women discuss everything from the economy to their husbands to Marcus Garvey, "their God" according to Marshall ("From the Poets" 24–25). Garvey's appearance is no accident here; Marshall suggests that his best hope for achieving his goal of taking many African Americans back to Africa may have lain within the kitchen among such women. As in *Praisesong*,

local women's rituals are the most powerful force for imagining community and nation in new ways. Marshall asserts that for her mother and her friends,

[...] talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed. They were women in whom the need for self-expression was strong, and since language was the only vehicle readily available to them they made of it an art form that—in keeping with the African tradition in which life and art are one—was an integral part of their lives. And their talk was a refuge. (26)

Here, Marshall supports Walker's assertion that contemporary African American women artists and writers must look to their female ancestors who performed African-informed local rituals as means of artistic expression. Further, Marshall calls the talk a "refuge," suggesting that this conversation created a safe space. The kitchen becomes, not the site of domestic labor, but a workshop and home for creative expression, a place Marshall calls "the wordshop of the kitchen" ("From the Poets" 30).

The home, the kitchen, becomes one of several sites of resistive power in Marshall's writings. Christian puts it thus: "*Praisesong for the Widow* explores the cultural continuity of peoples of African descent, from South to North America, as a stance from which to delineate the values of the New World" (74). Crucially, Marshall models this "stance" as a base of power that does not lie with a homogenized or a romanticized imagined Africa. Africa, like the kitchen, is one of a multiplicity of geographical touchstones for the collective culture Marshall articulates in *Praisesong*. Marshall's allegiance to the nation of islands and waters over the continent of Africa is clear in much of her fiction, as in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.⁶ The Barbados of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; the Bournehills of *The Chosen Place*; Tatem and Carriacou of *Praisesong*; and Triunion in *Daughters* exemplify Marshall's use of both mapped and invented islands in her fiction. Marshall's notion of a diasporic island homeland, then, both draws on existing spaces and needs new ones. Just as Marshall's characters draw on the past and innovate new routes of identification to define home, community, and nation, so Marshall relies on both existing and invented islands to construct her map of homeland.

The bridge formed by Tatem leads, at least partly, to Carriacou. The final section of *Praisesong*, titled "The Beg Pardon" for the ritual dance, is the culmination of Avey's journey to self and nation. Purged and baptized, Avey is reborn as a member of the annual excursion to this homeland. The cleansing finds Avey shedding the proper, suit-wearing, middle-class self who sacrificed her marriage to a capitalist American dream, and allows Avey to return to her younger, more comfortable, recognizable self formed on Tatem, with Aunt Cuney. In her essay "Paule Marshall's Women on Quest," Missy Dehn Kubitschek rightly notes that the achievement of this moment is fostered almost entirely by women. Citing in particular the bathing ritual Rosalie Parvay performs on Avey upon her arrival in Carriacou, Kubitschek notes, "Although Lebert/Legba secures Avey's presence on Carriacou, the characters who enable her to retain her sense of worth through her purging ordeal, and to participate in the fete, are women" (51). Building on her reading of Lebert Joseph as an incarnation of the often dually gendered West African deity Legba, Kubitschek continues, "Even Lebert becomes female during the dance. Clearly, female forces serve

as midwives for Avey's rebirth into her true self, Avatara" (52). Kubitschek's reading of *Praisesong* as a mythic quest is useful, though she is a bit too insistent on Avey's rejection of her past and her middle-class American existence as a precondition for inhabiting her "true self."⁷ Only through revisiting and claiming her past, *both* personal and collective, can Avey achieve the wholeness Marshall depicts in the Big Drum Dance. Avey's vomiting on the boat to Carriacou and her subsequent bath on the island are no doubt a purging of some trappings of middle-class American life she wishes to shed (most explicitly the waste of overeating mediocre food on the cruise ship), but Avey has also reclaimed the joy of the early years of her marriage and her childhood summers on Tatem as experiences that have shaped the nation she dances on Carriacou. This is less a rejection of her past than a sifting through and reclamation of the useable aspects of it.

The dancers model this use of both past and present as the Big Drum dance begins with "nation dances," with which they are "Saluting their nations" and "Summoning the Old Parents" (238). After each group "dances their nation," the "creole dances" start up and all comers are welcome to join (241). As the dance expands to become more inclusive, more dancers join in and the drumming increases in tempo. Other musicians join in, welcomed by the collective spirit, and one musician plays a goatskin drum to create the sound of unity, a "single, dark, plangent note [. . .] like that from the deep bowing of a cello" which "sounded like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs" (244). In evoking African American slavery with "sorrow songs," Marshall indicates that the creole dances have expanded to encompass the Diaspora in the New World. This single note sounds out a collective history:

The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. [. . .] Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart. (244–245)

Finally, just pages before *Praisesong* ends, Marshall can write of a "collective heart" without relying on a problematic notion of access to an imagined Africa or vague deep memory. This is so because Marshall has carefully guided Avey, and her readers, through the careful process of using individual history and experiences as a means of accessing "subliminal memories." Further, the "longing" and "feelings" are the shared culture here. Marshall, while acknowledging African retentions in the creole dances, is not arguing for a long-held set of African practices, but for a shared culture of yearning, of "longing" for the very connection that these dances provide.

The memory that sates this longing is not of others' experiences, but of one's own life. Avey remembers Juba from Tatem (162), emphasizing that the acknowledgement of diasporic connection is more a return to self than a journey outward. As Jane Olmsted notes, "the last third of the book is really a series of recognitions" (260). Further, in recognizing Juba as kin to the ring shout Aunt Cuney was cast out of, Avey refuses to separate sacred and social dance. Just as she has come to recognize dancing in her living room with Jay

as a sacred ritual, so the ring shout becomes part of the canon of dances on Carriacou that includes Juba. Rogers reads this connection as dependent on physical memory:

Avey's body is not, it seems, a space which can be inscribed upon, but one where embodied memories can resurface. Avey's reconnection with her body, her awakening to a physical sensation, triggers a series of memories from throughout her life that help her recontextualize her experiences. It also triggers, however, the surfacing of collective memories of an African past. (87)

The notion of "collective memories of an African past" would be problematically abstract, romanticized, and vague if not for the intense specificity of "memories from throughout her life" that have led Avey to this collectivity. As Rogers suggests, these "embodied memories" that fulfill Lorde's call for "uses of the erotic" are both individual and shared.

Further exploring the specificity of this collective memory, Christian illuminates the working of the Big Drum Dance not just to signal the completion of Avey's journey to a spiritual home, but to articulate a broader black diasporic collectivity as well. Christian writes of the dance,

It is also a ceremony that combines rituals from several black societies: the Ring Dances of Tatum [sic], the Bojangles of New York, the voodoo drums of Haiti, the rhythms of various African peoples brought to the New World [. . .] it is also the embodiment of the history and culture of New World Blacks. Avey hears the note that distinguishes Afro-American blues, spirituals and jazz, Afro-Caribbean Calypso and Reggae, Brazilian music [. . .] (82)

The Big Drum Dance is thus a performance of the type of diaspora Marshall envisions in *Praisesong*. Avey's diffuse but culturally and historically coherent diasporic nation of islands and water is made visible in this "embodiment of the history and culture of New World Blacks." This is only possible because Avey has taken the individual journey necessary to articulate this cultural homeland. Avey has modeled the work to form a concept of nation defined by difference within unity; her experience as a unique individual is absolutely crucial to the existence of this collectivity.

It is no coincidence that Avey's separation from self, her discontent with life, surfaces and increases beginning when she stops visiting Tatem every summer. The dance on one island allows Avey to claim another island. In deciding to return to Tatem and to invite her grandchildren to claim this homeland, Avey will consolidate her redefined nation. Avey's personal restoration to self and health suggests that claiming a shared diasporic space for people of African descent is an act of collective healing as well. Largely because of its investment in both personal and shared histories, Marshall's *Praisesong*, succeeds where several theorists of diaspora have failed: the novel effectively preserves difference within unity by creating a homeland that is both uniquely redemptive for an individual and potentially useful for many others.⁸

In the last pages of *Praisesong*, Avey takes up the work of spreading the gospel of collectivity everywhere she goes, thereby expanding the homeland map to include her growing "territory" that includes "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" (255). She promises to return to Tatem, bring her descendants there, and keep on telling the story of Ibo Landing. Kubitschek describes the importance of this decision: "Avatara's decision to take on her great-aunt Cuney's role as griot, retelling the story of the Ibos, shows an individual's consciously choosing to participate in myth" (44). Avey retells this particular story because it is part of the history held in her island homeland that has prompted her literal and spiritual homeland. This use of "myth" in *Praisesong* is Avey's work to make her diaspora useable for others, beginning with her grandsons. Kubitschek, reading Marshall through Joseph Campbell's definitions of myth, says that Avey has done the work of "the classical quester" who "undertakes the journey to renew his society rather than to find himself" (56). By choosing a middle-age female protagonist, Marshall is revising the identity of "the classical quester," suggesting that this effort to "renew society" is a form of women's work.

If Avey is a griot, surely Paule Marshall earns this title as well. Suggesting the resemblance between Avey's expression of nation consolidation and Marshall's own form of the same work, Christian writes, "Paule Marshall, like Avey Johnson, must continue the process by passing on the rituals. And this function is finally the essence of *her* praisesong" (83). Writing, like dancing, is a ritual for articulating individuality and community in the New World. Avey Johnson and Paule Marshall dance and write a nation in the island spaces and water crossings of *Praisesong for the Widow*. This cultural and geographical space born of women's work makes room not only for Avey, but offers a homeland Marshall and her readers as well. Marshall writes, "She had finally after all these decades made it across" (248). This is not a crossing to Africa or a movement in geographical space, but a journey "across" Avey's lifetime to reach a spiritual homeland. Following Avey's travels, the reader too has "made it across" to find a home space that offers an identity rooted in individual and collective memory and a model for how we might rethink nation.

NOTES

1. See Barbara T. Christian, "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," *Callaloo* 18 (Spring-Summer 1983): 74-84; Barbara Frey Waxman, "The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's 'Praisesong for the Widow,'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9.3 (1987): 94-99; and Susan Rogers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," *African American Review* 34.1 (Spring 2000): 77-93.
2. I am thinking here of Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as an "imagined political community" that is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" in terms of "territorial and social space." See Benedict Anderson, "Introduction," *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983) 2, 6.
3. The phrase "difference within unity" comes from Brent Edwards. See Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2003) 11. Edwards's insistence on diaspora as a practice is also very much in keeping with Marshall's depiction of diaspora in *Praisesong*.
4. Barbara Frey Waxman, for example, notes that this sense of the griot's "mission" reemerges in Avey after she dreams of fighting with her Aunt Cuney. Waxman smartly goes on to make the metatextual comment that, "Marshall herself, as a writer, is clearly committed to such a mission," as is apparent in her celebration of her own immediate female lineage of the "poets in the kitchen." See Waxman 96.

5. The “foundational story” in *Praisesong* is that of Ibo Landing. This story is one version of the often-told tale of the Flying Africans, which appears in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and told for children by Virginia Hamilton in *The People Could Fly*, to name just two examples.
6. Jane Olmsted notes that Bournehills of *The Chosen Place* shares proximity to Africa with Barbados. See Olmsted 251.
7. Susan Rogers rightly argues that Marshall is not wholly demonizing middle-class American life, but rather critiquing “material advancement [. . .] when it exists at the expense of cultural identity.” See Rogers 84.
8. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, for example, sets out to preserve difference within unity but ends up privileging the isolated individual. Carol Boyce Davies’s *Black Women, Writing, and Identity* is somewhat more successful in this area, partly because she charts diaspora through a variety of genres of writing, finding commonalities but preserving textual and identity differences.

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