



IDENTITY POETICS AND CULTURAL GENETICS: MAPPING DANCE AND MEMORIES IN PAULE MARSHALL'S *PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW*

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ABSTRACT

Exclusively converging on Paule Marshall's fiction, this article examines the author's perspective on the impact of colonialism on the psyche of African Americans and Caribbeans. Marshall's reformulation of West Indian experience lies definitely between American cultural bequest and African ethos. Her literary and memorial discourse expresses the peculiar bond existing between race, identity and culture. As such, *Praisesong for the widow* (1983) engraves the issues of memory and cultural genetics in its poetics of identity. Accordingly, the intent of this article is to examine the extent to which history influences both culture and memory. The paper also explores the sense of belonging to an African diasporic community and the twisting pathway to memorial reconstruction. The resilience to dominant and exclusive cultures as well as the recognition of the creolization of identities in a context of an atypical historiography is of paramount interest. This article validates then traces, rituals and dances are core motifs and tropes which inform the process of memorial recovery unavoidably concomitant to a multilayered and polygonal construction of identities through cultural expeditions.

Keywords: Caribbean, culture, dance, memory, excursion.

RESUME

En se concentrant exclusivement sur la fiction de Paule Marshall, cet article examine la perspective de l'auteur sur l'impact du colonialisme sur la psyché des Africains-américains et des Caribéens. La reformulation par Marshall de l'expérience antillaise se situe définitivement entre le legs culturel américain et l'éthos africain. Son discours littéraire et mémoriel exprime le lien singulier qui existe entre la race, l'identité et la culture. Dans cette perspective, Marshall examine dans *Praisesong for the widow* (1983) les questions de mémoire et de génétique culturelle dans sa poétique de l'identité. Par conséquent, le projet de cet article est de considérer dans quelle mesure l'histoire influence la culture et la mémoire. L'article explore également le sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté diasporique africaine et le chemin ardu de la reconstruction mémorielle. La résilience aux cultures dominantes et exclusives ainsi que la reconnaissance de la créolisation des identités dans un contexte historiographique particulier sont d'un intérêt primordial. Cet article corrobore alors que les traces, les rituels et les danses sont des motifs et des tropes fondamentaux qui informent le processus de récupération des mémoires, inévitablement concomitants à une construction complexe et multiforme des identités par le biais d'expéditions culturelles.

Mots-clés : Caraïbes, culture, danse, excursion, identité.

INTRODUCTION

African-American women writers relentlessly resort to fictional works and specific literary language to appropriately retort to race and sociological precincts in America. This literary ritual persists today along with the broad-spectrum call for women writers of the 1970s and 1980s which overhauled the interest in writers who had tremendous praise without nationwide or global appreciation. In the 20th century, African American writers imparted an outstanding quality to the literary formulation of their unique experience in North America. In producing their own literature, they established their own literary traditions devoid of the white intellectual filter. Thanks to the formation of an artistic canon, they have been bequeathed the appreciation denied to their literary foremothers.

Among African-American women writers who prodigiously made reference to African's tradition and culture, Paule Marshall is noticeable in regard to her contribution to clarifying African cultural bequest. Her works underscored the unique experience of West Indians within African cultural affiliation and the impulse for black Americans to repossess their African legacy. Marshall's fiction is definitely embedded in Black cultural history, and as such, she uses black female characters to address contemporary feminist issues from an Afrocentric perspective. According to Thelma Ravell-Pinto, *Praisesong for the widow* (1983), henceforward referred to as *Praisesong*, "is not only about alienation and reaffirmation, but also the role and the importance of Black women as transmitters and preservers of culture, identity, and heritage" (Journal of Black Studies, Book Reviews, 1987).

As such, it designs the structure of the present study as it raises identical queries in the context of cultural power relations. The postcolonial posture induces the role of literature in the sedition of cultural ascendancy and in the decolonization of historical memories. Subsequently, *Praisesong* conveys the striving for the reappropriation of an African cultural legacy in a country subjugated by exclusive WASP cultural norms.

The plot of the novel takes place in the mid-1970s, narrating the life of the protagonist, Avey Johnson, a sixty-four year-old African-American widow sealed from her true self. It charts her pursuit for self-identity and communal memories the conceptual vehicles that drive Marshall's narrative project. All her major fiction has brought the enthralling permanence of ritual to figure in the juncture between Americans from African descent and the New-World. *Praisesong* endorses the efficiency of cultural resurgence whether personal dogmas or communal ritual performances. The novel shares with *Chosen place, timeless people* and *Brown girls, brown stones* (1984), the prevalence of myth and history which provide outline, organization and configuration to the redefinition of «nation».

Avey Johnson inaugurates the story completely estranged from her own culture and presenting the facade of a successful middle-class woman. The process climaxes when she glimpses her own image in the looking-glass. She feels a stranger to herself and is dispossessed of her cultural identity not truly recognizing her African persona.

Avey Johnson endeavors to perform wholeness by articulating and giving worth and price to her individual and collective past in terms that redefine cultural, geographical and memorial identity. With artistry, she provides a peculiar reassessment of African American trajectory to the mystical African ancestry.

As such, *Praisesong* addresses the issue of culture, space and identity reconstruction, and finds its relevancy in the prominence and significance of black cultural aesthetics formulated by the role and place of excursion in the process of regaining oneself.

In the process of analysis, notions of race and culture are scrutinized predominantly through the works of Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness.* - 1993), Édouard Glissant (*Poétique de la Relation-* 1990), Edward Kamau Braithwaite ("The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" - 1986), Edward Franklin Frazier (*Race and Culture Contacts in the Modern World* - 1957), Sir Edward Burnett Tyler (*Primitive Culture* -1920), Courtney Thorsson ("Dancing up a Nation: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*" -2007) and many others who provide outstanding essays on Marshall's cultural discourse and artistry. They all provide useful tools in discussing and understanding cultural forfeiture and displacement, cultural domination and vital reconstruction, anthropology and rituals.

The present study questions and probes Marshall's assumption of African American ethos as the legatee of the African culture. Its intent is to illustrate how history, space and memory construct black women's experience fraught by cultural fundamentals that are vital in defining identity politics. Accordingly, our research procedure investigates Marshall's complex and exceptional cultural overhaul, geography and memory through the formulation of Avery's memorial journey and Aunt Cuney's spiritual guide.

The study articulates history (the Middle Passage), dance and rituals, displacement and memorial wanderings in theoretical, racial, and cultural viewpoints. The structure that sets up our article is incorporated within several central questions pertaining to the notion of identity politics, dance, rituals, and imagined places as safe heavens.

In order to measure the multifaceted implications of culture in Marshall's *Praisesong*, the present paper is organized around three sections. The first section

presents significant definitions and considers African lineage, the "call" of the ancestors and the Middle Passage as inferences in the construction of identity. It also focuses on the underpinning cultural aspects of history and identity inquiries. The second section explores Marshall's representation of journeying and memory as the site of the spiritual excursion. This physical and mental cosmology is discernible through the occurrence displacement and wanderings. We will have a detailed investigation of how culture and history are interconnected to envision an imagined mother country. The last section examines the quest for historiographical construction and its implications in transatlantic cultural nationalism. We will have a detailed examination of Marshall's portrayal of dances and rituals as West-African cosmology which anchorages the cultural journey of Avey Johnson.

1. The Mystical Return to Genesis

As Avey's memories of the past surface throughout her journey, she becomes progressively infatuated with her lineage. Lebert Joseph's metaphysical question "*What's your nation ? Yarraba, Moko, Banda, Cromanti? Did they have something to do with Africa ?*" (Marshall 1983: 167) triggers emotional and identical reactions in Avey's mind. Overwhelmed by the question, Avey grasps Lebert's intent, recalling the undying snapshot of her daughter's cowrie necklace: "*She thought she heard the faint rattle of the necklace of cowrie shells and amber Marion always wore*" (Marshall, 1983, p.168). Disregarding her dual national filiation, she rejoinders by displaying her American allegiance. That withdrawal from her African affiliation is the core factor that activates memorial recovery during Avey's journey. In that perspective, Carriacou stands as a space for memory and remembrance, as a place "*designed to stay the course of history*" (Marshall, 1983, p. 167). Thus, Marshall engages in mimicking history, allowing Avey to perform the trans-Atlantic crossing of the sea referring to the Middle Passage, the matrix of black maritime voyage.

1.1. Replicating the Middle Passage

Like Ntozake Shange in *Sassafrass, cypress & indigo* (1982) and Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day* (1988), who depicted the sea island as a significant landscape in the black imagination, Marshall envisions the Sea Islands as a space both material and fictional. The spatial perspective enables Marshall to articulate a reply to Countee Cullen's existential question "*What is Africa to me?*". Accordingly, people on the excursion to Carriacou incarnate countless nations of African origin. Clearly, Marshall uses the Sea Islands both as a passage and a sanctified space. During her physical and metaphorical journey from Grenada to Carriacou, Avey envisions a dream about the Middle Passage. This oceanic rite of passage is the enforced

voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Correspondingly, Avey reaches the island of Carriacou by boat. Precisely, for Paul Gilroy, *Bianca Pride* inexorably recalls the Middle Passage: "*Ships immediately focus attention on the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland...*"(1993, p.4).

Replicating the traumatic maritime experience of her enslaved foremothers, Avey is able to appease and assuage her own torment as a form of therapy: "their suffering-the depth of it, the weight in the cramped space-made hers of no consequence" (Marshall, 1983, p.209). As a child, Aunt Cuney pointed to Avey Johnson where the Ibos, from Nigeria, Biafra region, possibly landed from the ships in Tatem, South Carolina. When the Ibos "*pure born*" were brought as enslaved people to the lands of Tatem, South Carolina, they basically strolled on the water. *Igbo Landing*, located at Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island, Glynn County, Georgia, indicates the locus where Igbo people disembarked in 1803 and drowned in the sea, repudiating the mere idea to submit to slavery in the United States. That momentous mass suicide, instilled in the very psyche of African-Americans through the Igbo memorial pattern is here commemorated by Paule Marshall. In a voice that seemed to possess her, Aunt Cuney would recall the exact words her grandmother always prophesied: "*her body might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos*" (Marshall, 1983, p.39).

Very significantly, the first scene of *Praisesong* takes place aboard the *Bianca Pride* navigating on the Caribbean waters. The boat, as an analogy of the Middle Passage, is a fundamental constituent in the historiography of African-Americans. While on her way to Carriacou, Avey falls asleep on the boat and wakes up, vomiting and defecating: "*her entire insides erupted*" (Marshall 1983:204); "*the contractions*" had reached below her stomach to the place where up to this morning in the rum shop shed felt the strange oppressive fullness » (Marshall, 1983, p.207). Avey's physical discomfort and unease are very similar to the conditions of enslaved people who were exposed to disease and various misfortunes. The autobiographical account of the West African Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), is particularly acknowledged for its vivid testimony of the distress enslaved Africans endured on the transatlantic voyages. Avey's experience lies in the realm of generational trauma: As culture is entrenched in complex historical and sociological conditions, *Praisesong* centers on Avey investigating her origin and lineage from a feminine perspective as women are the spirit of the "*ancient ones*".

1.2. The Call of the Ancestors

According to Gay Wilentz, the concept of «*generational continuity*» and the passing on of cultural values are held traditionally as a woman's realm of authority.

Significantly, during the cruise on the *Bianca Pride*, Avey has a dream about her Great-aunt Cuney. The fantasy is the token evidence, psychologically and physically, of the ancestors' call:

She was vaguely troubled by the dream, it was the strangest thing but that morning her body had felt as sore when awoke as if she had been actually fighting; and all during the day, in the dim rear of her mind, she had sensed her Great-aunt still struggling to haul her off up the road. Even now her left wrist retained something of the pressure of the old woman's iron grip. (Marshall, 1983, p.47)

Because it does not occur to Avey that she could belong to more than one "nation", she only prerogatives her sense of belonging to the United States while her repressed African pedigrees are long disremembered. Consequently, Cuney attempts to convince Avey to follow her down the road in Tatem, South Carolina. According to Joyce Owens Pettis, in *Toward wholeness in Paule Marshall's fiction* (1995), Aunt Cuney's intrusive and disruptive re-entry into Avery's comfortable life (although Great-aunt Cuney is dead) is a symbolic representation of historical conflict between the past and the present. The feud is also intended metaphorically to reposition Avey along the path to Ibo Landing from which she has drastically strayed: "*the ancestral interference precipitates dreams and flashbacks that cumulatively bring Avey to realize her fractured psyche. More important, though the ancestors direct Avey through a process of spiritual regeneration*" (Marshall, 1983, p. 121).

The unswerving extraction from specific African tribes "*Yarrada, Moko, Banda, Cromanti*" (Marshall, 1983, p.67) are exemplified as cultural affiliation. Avey not only gains knowledge of chanting the praises of the forefathers but she, too, is sanctified as Moira Ferguson puts it:

Marshall's protagonists are women who find that when they confront the past not only do they better understand themselves as African people, but they also gain greater awareness of their womanhood. Marshall's female protagonists discover that their African identity and their female identity are intertwined (2013, p.52)

This mythical underpinning is part of the construction of identity and gives a sense of belonging to a huge transnational community. The reminiscence of the ancestries and the celebration of a long uninterrupted lineage, even if it is mythical, is an act of enablement, the expression of the strength of cultural commemoration and of the resilience to Western cultural ascendancy. Avey is finally able to amalgamate her manifold cultural attachments and cultivate a sense of belonging to several places at the same time: "*her mind continuing to swing like a pendulum gone amok from one end of her life to the other, she felt to be dwelling in any number of places at once and in a score of different time frames*" (Marshall, 1983, p.232). Avey's cultural posture endorses what Dubois calls "double consciousness"; that very appropriation of the African cultural tenet is discoursed by Glissant. In his contribution *Poétique de la Relation-Poétique III*, he conceptualized the filial jonction

of of America and the Caribbean with African cultures: "*si ce Néo-Américain ne chante pas des chansons africaines d'il y a deux ou trois siècles, il réinstalle dans la Caraïbe, au Brésil et en Amérique du Nord, par pensée de la trace, des formes d'art qu'il propose comme valables pour tous*" (1990, p.17)

After Avey envisions Aunt Cuney and captures her spiritual message, she decides to prematurely end her trip and respond to ancestors' call. On Grenada, the annual excursion to Carricou is a genuine replica of the festive African villages. The act of remembering, Marshall termed "*subliminal memories*" (Marshall, 1983, p.244-45) is so influential in cultural reconstruction that the voices "*sounded like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs*" (Marshall, 1983, p.244). The act of remembrance, the emotions and feelings conveyed become more imperious and authoritarian than the official historical version. While returning to New York, Avey encounters an old man, Lebert Joseph, who induces her to join the yearly ritual excursion in Carriacou.

2. Cultural Traces and Memorial Journeying

As Avey is now cognizant of her African origins, she gradually and strenuously reconstructs her past from the few traces left in her mind: "*sometimes the least thing seen or heard during the day, or merely thought of in passing, could trigger a dream of people and events long forgotten*" (Marshall, 1983, p.67). Avey Johnson's elusive memories from her childhood in Tatem, such as the dance steps of the Ring Shout, her aunt's story about the arrival and rebellion of the Ibo *enslaved people* in South Carolina, or the homeland dances performed by the inhabitants of Carriacou are significant cultural traces of the past. Those are traces from which memorial reconstruction can be assumed. Through these transient traces of memory, Avey connects with Caribbean cultures and becomes aware of the complexity of her diasporic identity.

2.1. Tracing the Origins

During the transatlantic trade, trade, new identities developed in the American colonies. Those traces that Édouard Glissant qualifies "*les seules pensées de la trace*" (1990, p.16-17) are essential in Marshall's memorial bequest. They expound the cultural endurances between the Caribbean and Africa also underscored by Edward Kamau Brathwaite: "*African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not pure African, but an adaptation carried out mainly in terms of African tradition*" (1986, p.192).

Brathwaite contends that the African permanency and durability in the Americas can be reinstated in what he calls the "*literature of reconnection*" : "*what I mean by the*

"literature of reconnection" is a recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as root living, creative, and still part of the main"(1986, 255). Marshall's *Praisesong* is undeniably part and parcel of this literature of reconnection between the individual and the African inheritance across the Atlantic.

While on the dockside, Avey is physically and emotionally connected with the multitude. As a trajectory already identified, she intuitively follows the community members heading for the cruisers for the national excursion: "*the absurd thought came to her : to take her along with them*"(Marshall, 1983, p.70). Subsequently, the corporeal interaction with Aunt Cuney transmutes her dream into reality « *a hand on her elbow was actually steering her out in the crowd*» (Marshall 1983: 72). Besides, the engraving in Avey's body of the traces of her genesis is clearly noticeable when Avey steps into the dancing sphere in Carriacou. She unexpectedly comprehends that she discerns the steps of the dance, profoundly inscribed inside herself. Years later, the steps surface again "*where had that night surfaced from ?*" (Marshall, 1983, p.56) knotting Avey physically to her own people : "*and for the first time since when she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads (like the kind used in embroidery) which were thin to the point of invisibility yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island*" (Marshall, 1983, p.249). Marshall's novel is itself a memorial crusade divergent from the official historical discourse. Instead of the historical recordings aiming at a scientific and exact occurrences and analyses, she rather centers on the procedure of memorial retrieval.

2.2. Memorial Crusade, History and Culture

In Avey's mental process, memorial reconstruction contradicts the prevailing and univocal historical discourse. As such, the novel explores the slow and painful process which is unavoidably interconnected to a foundational construction of identities. The notions of cultural identity and displacement are central motifs and tropes which inform the process of memorial salvage. As such, Aunt Cuney, who is an essential part of the chain of memory, prompts younger African-Americans to circumvent the estranging impacts of acculturation that colonizes body and mind. In order to retrieve her past memory, the reunification of her "*self*" becomes cultural prerequisite.

In the opening of the novel, Avey's memories ascend. She recalls how the cruise was deprecated by her daughter as superficial, prosaic and white people's cultural symbols: "*Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway, I keep asking you?*" (Marshall, 1983, p.13). The crusade triggers an identical transfiguration and evokes other interconnected journeys which Avey has to memorize in order to overhaul her physical and emotional comfort. At significant

moments during the Caribbean cruise, Avey recollects her developmental years in South Carolina. She also ponders folktales of the legendary voyage of the Middle Passage and Ibo enslaved people's return to Africa. In all of these journeys, the feminine body is of crucial significance. As an epigraph to the third section entitled "Lave Tete", Paule Marshall quotes a poem by Randall Jarrell: "*Oh, Bars of my body, open, open!*" (Marshall, 1983, p.48). Avey Johnson becomes cognizant of her body as a repository of memory, as a place where physical sense resonances emotional feeling.

Avey's experience in Grenada lies amid spatial wandering and unexpectedness, constructing an unsteady, insecure and misleading environment that reflects the atypical identity procedure of African Americans from Caribbean lineage. Henceforth, *Praisesong* raises identical inferences amidst the multidimensional context of postcolonialism, of the sedition of cultural ascendancy and of the decolonization of historical memories. The novel conveys the exertion of recovering an African cultural legacy in a country subjugated by exclusive WASP cultural norms.

3. Repelling Cultural Dogmas: Rituals and Dance for Re-memberment

The core of Edward Franklin Frazier's empirical and theoretical work points to the issue of assimilation as a central predicament for African-Americans. As such, Frazier addresses the crucial issue of the cultural posture of African-Americans. Subsequently, Paule Marshall, as well as theorists, explores thereupon the meaning of communal experience and cultural trauma. African-American authors subsequently sharpened their creative skills to envision the crucial bond between cultural legacy and identity. In *Praisesong*, Paule Marshall moves the diasporic site from North America to the Caribbean, which, representatively looks eastward toward the African continent. The geographical situation of the Caribbean Islands is an analogy of the dialectic bond between African-American history and African cultural identity. The inborn cultural bond is of paramount importance as the institution of slavery dismantled nearly all traces of African culture. In *The Afro-American novel and its tradition*, Bernard W. Bell focuses on the essential aspect of culture in the spiritual quest inscribed in the heart of the African American culture. For Bell, Black American novelists began exploring the literacy possibilities of their dual residual oral afro-American folk forms and western literacy tradition for appropriate structures and language to construct their visions of human condition (Bell, 1987, p.XII). Marshall's fictional contribution to cultural contingencies can be referred to as an outstanding essay in terms of memory and legacy. And, the tenacious African presence in Marshall's novel is rendered by the use of rituals and dances.

3.1. Performing Ontological Rituals

Marshall reconnects the African world by underscoring how Africanism functions in the United States of America and in the Caribbean. Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of African-Americans to perform their original cultural traditions, many practices, values and beliefs persevered. Elaborate rituals and ceremonies were a significant part of African-Americans' ancestral culture. Many West African societies traditionally believed that a spiritual life source existed after death, and that ancestors in this spiritual realm could mediate between the supreme creator and the living. Consequently, Avey's physical and memorial wanderings in the Caribbean leads her to a corporeal experience of memorial recovery, but the corporeal performances of rituals keep memories of the past anchored in the bodies. Rituals appear as a mechanism allowing the remembrance of one's origins and cultural legacy and therefore undermine monolithic identities, generating a sense of belonging to several places at the same time as well as a prospect for creolization.

The ritual performance of the dance in the "Beg Pardon" section is psychologically and sociologically commanding as it relies both on individual and communal history. Indeed, the ritualistic communal experience unites dancers in a shared diasporic culture:

Dimly, through the fog of her grief, Avey Johnson understood something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in those small rituals that had once shaped their lives.....Something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and Avey's desire to join them to the vast unknown lineage that made their living possible (Marshall, 1983, p.137).

The episode of the "Beg Pardon" is thus an important archetype of diasporic cultural formulation. Enslaved people's rituals were part of both systematic and exceptional occurrences; many of these traditions such as "Get Down", "Ring Shouts", and other elements of African body language subsist as rudiments of modern dance (Thorsson, 2007, p.650). "The Ring Shout", a religious ritual coming from enslaved Africans in the West Indies and in the United States, is an instance of creolized religious practices in the Americas since it is an African ritual executed in Christian instances.

Thus, the effects of rituals on Avey's identity construction highlight the multidimensional nature of identity. She remembers in minutiae her ritual march to the Ibo Landing with Aunt Cuney or the yearly excursions to the Bear Mountain State Park with her family from Coney Island. The sight of abandoned fields of a former plantation in Carriacou reminds her of the cotton plantations on Tatem Island. The fields embody the traces of enslaved Africans, as such, the rituals of remembrance in Carriacou enable transference of historical memories divergent from hegemonic historical discourses. Accordingly, the

corporeal *anamnesis* negates dominant discourses and consents lost memories to come to the surface. Ritual dances are thus depicted as "*the shuffle designed to stay the course of history*" (Marshall, 1983, p.250).

3.2. Corporeal Retort and Anthropological Dance

Early in *Praisesong*, Avey evokes her Aunt Cuney "*caught crossing her feet in a Ring Shout*» and the "*arms shot up, hands arched like wings*" (Marshall, 1983, p.33). She witnesses Lebert and other community leaders chant and dance for preceding generations. Ritual dances and Joseph's query sound as a metaphysical request: "*What nation you is?*" (Marshall, 1983, p.238). The question of Avey's ancestries converts to an obsession and is eventually responded when her body recollects the steps of the «Ring Shout». She naturally and unsurprisingly joins her community from the African diaspora in the dance ring: "*She had slipped without being conscious of it into a step that was something more than just walking. Her feet of their own accord began to glide forward*" (Marshall, 1983, p.248). The excerpt highlights the impulsiveness of Avey's movements. The surging of memories through the corporeal rituals underscores the uncontainable presence of traces of the past. According to Susan Rogers in her article titled "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*" Avey "*becomes aware of her body as a repository of memory*" (2000, p.77). She examined Marshall's construction of a fictional body as a site of cultural expression and memory and presented how "*the body functions in the text not only as an indicator of personal consciousness, but also as a metaphor for African people's cultural disinheritance created by the African diaspora*" (2000, p.78). Years later, in her sixties, when Avey reenacts the choreographic movements, thousands of miles away, she effectively "*restores not just her place but Cuney's as well, in the community*" (Thorsson, 2007, p.649).

Lebert Joseph finds Avey's "*nation*" just watching her dancing: "*I watched you good last night at the fete and I can't say for sure but I feels you is an Arada, oui. Something about the way you was doing the Carriacou Tramp there towards the end put me in mind of people from that nation*" (Marshall, 1983, p.252). By the end of the night, Avey performs a ritual dance celebrating African cultural roots. During her performance, she ascertains, amasses and assembles herself "*centered and sustained... restored to her proper axis*" (Marshall, 1983, p.254).

The dance is a prevailing potency because it foreshadows both individual story and collective history. Perceptibly, the ritual performance bonds the dancers in a communal diasporic culture. Marshall's portrayal of the «Beg Pardon» conjectures a diaspora that preserves difference within unity, individuality within collectivity. The moment of the "Beg Pardon" is thus an important model of diasporic nationality. *Praisesong* ushers Avey to the procedure of articulating and joining the diasporic homeland personified in this dance. According to Frederik

Turner in his outstanding book *Beyond Geography, the Western Spirit against the Wilderness* (1983), "dance is the secret language of the body; it is the expression language of life» (Turner, 1983, p.47).

Consequently, the complexity of Avey's manifold identity appears during the dance. Her cautious steps progressively gain confidence: "all of her moving suddenly with a vigor and passion she hadn't felt in years" (Marshall, 1983, p.249). Not only does Avey remember the steps but she also finds some inclination and contentment in the dancing ritual which displays the emancipatory dimension of the ritual. Culture definitely plays a crucial role in Avey's life as she uses dance to disremember her cultural disturbances. The dance on Carriacou, at the culmination of the novel, is the most symbolical expression of cultural identity. Avey is predetermined and doomed to hold «special powers of seeing and knowing» (Marshall, 1983, p.218). These competencies are certified when Avey admits and accepts the cultural substance and scope of black magic. Culture and magic are the cradle of the African American conjure tradition of healing and harming that emerge from African cultural essentials.

Avey Johnson surrenders to the rules and principles of ethnic and diasporic dance. As such, she values the non-western legends and traditions which elicit positive attitudes in the midst of cultural subjugation. According to Paule Marshall's own language in *Shaping the World*, "they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa, centuries old oral mode by which the culture and history, the wisdom of the race had been transmitted." (Marshall, 1973, p.103). The dance in Carriacou renews the «consciousness» of Avey's cultural connections and constitutes the threads that bond her to the other members of the African diaspora. By performing a memorial ritual on Carriacou Island, Avey is able to mend the memory of her ancestors and weave ontological bonds with the community.

CONCLUSION

Identity, memories, and rituals frame the genetic pattern of Marshall's creative writing. In her narrative, the strategic cultural recovery requires the conception of rituals in which characters can perceive and comprehend their cultural identity in a diasporic perspective. For Avey, the protagonist, cultural queries and the return to Genesis are translated into a corporeal and choreographic sequence illustrated by the steps of the Ring Shout in a vibrant connection with her people from the African continent. As such, culture, in Marshall's view, is basically and profoundly an act of resistance, a critical and integral part of black women's trial and triumph against acculturation and sexism.

Marshall has definitely a sensitive and delicate discernment of any peril to the safeguard and persistence of traditional African-American cultural values. As

storytelling is first and foremost a woman's sphere of influence, Avey Johnson restores and repossesses her tradition and accepts her mission to pass it on to her children, Marion Johnson, Annawilda Johnson and Sis, her oldest daughter.

In her anthropological Marshall celebrates the vivacity of African diasporic culture and spiritual awakening. Correspondingly, cultural awareness is central in Avey's development from a state of dissent to recognition of her legacy, conceiving a new collective genealogy. Interestingly enough, her home in Tatem, granted by aunt Cuney as an inheritance, is the material locus of her spiritual and cultural legacy, the sanctuary of her original nation. In the locus of her home, the metaphor of a microcosmic nation, she inculcates her grandchildren the authentic substance and significance of her diasporic cultural legacy as Cuney, a homophone of canny (meaning intelligent and perceptive as a woman can be), performed for her.

As such, Aunt Cuney articulates the mandate for African-Americans to value the past as a vehicle for empowerment. According to Keith Sandiford, the Ibos noncompliance with western constraints of time and technological science "*effectively inaugurated for Tatem heirs a historical agenda of resistance, denial and affirmation.*" (Sandiford, 1986, p.383). Marshall uses the Sea Island as space both real and imagined. This imaginary vision allows her to provide an answer to Countee Cullen's question "*What is Africa to me?*" By writing an African-informed space as a site of identity poetics and cultural genetics, Marshall allows the reader to overhear the sacred, unwritten history of the Ibos. Thus Marshall and her contemporaries use the Sea Islands as a bridge, a space, as powerful tools for identity and cultural salvage. Subsequently, Avey imagines a Promised Land born out of her African and female identities. The Promised Land is substantiated and typified by the South though the site is a disputable and questionable place. In an attempt to shed light on the relationship prevailing between «place» and «self» Paule Marshall asserts the power of individual and communal experience.

Cuney's attachment to the diasporic principle of cultural transmission is vital part of the African-American culture. This principle has been re-affirmed by Paule Marshall's own terms in Moira Ferguson's book *A Human Necklace: The African Diaspora and Paule Marshall's Fiction*: "*I think it is absolutely necessary for black people to effect a spiritual return to origins in Africa. As the history of people of African descent in the United State and the diaspora is fragmented and interrupted, I consider it my task as a writer to initiate readers to the challenges this journey entails*" (2013, p.47).

Thereupon, Avey, not only asserts her own convoluted ethnicity but her imaginary African diasporic connection is regarded as a response to cultural disconnection. Besides, in *Mules and Men* Zora Neale Hurston indicates the significant work performed by storytellers by noting that they are «*lying up a nation*» (Hurston, 1935, p.19). As in Hurston's work, the nation Marshall charts is

both imagined and real, determined by geography and a shared culture. 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 diverse manifestations of the cultural and geographical determinations in *Praisesong*. That posture within a cultural framework prompts critics to perceive Marshall's fiction as a pivotal work in twentieth-century African American women's literary history. Through sinuous traces, the text stages the sinuous memorial reconstruction of Avey and the collective acts of remembrance of the African diaspora throughout from the United States to the Caribbean.

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