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UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Gaston Berger,

BP 234 Saint Louis, Sénégal

Tel +221 77 718 51 35 / +221 77 408 87 82

E-mail : [babacar.dieng@ugb.edu.sn](mailto:babacar.dieng@ugb.edu.sn) / [khadidiatou.diallo@ugb.edu.sn](mailto:khadidiatou.diallo@ugb.edu.sn)

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Where They Came from: Paule Marshall's Allusion to Africa in *Praisesong for the Widow*

**Mame Bounama DIAGNE**

Vacataire, Département d'Anglais

Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, Sénégal

Abstract

This article explores Paule Marshall's numerous references to Africa in her third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). This novel portrays a sixty-four-year old African American widow who suffers from a psychological crisis, after having rejected her cultural values for years. Avey Johnson must put an end to her cruise and go on a voyage of self-rediscovery. Her adventure points to the importance in the black woman's life of a past that starts with the forced displacement of Africans from their continent to America. Therefore, this study scrutinizes the relation between the protagonist and the place of origin of her ancestors. It puts in the limelight the important question of home for black women in the diaspora. It resorts to Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" as an analytical tool to emphasize the hybridity of culture. Throughout the paper, the focus is put on the symbolism of Africa in the narrative and on the author's plea for a reconnection with the past. Marshall fictionalizes a historical event (the mass suicide of Igbo slaves in Georgia, in 1803) to foreground the African origin of her main character who must make amends with the ancestors before she can attain a certain stability and belonging to a community scattered around America and beyond.

Keywords: Africa, origins, home, crisis, hybridity

Résumé

Cet article étudie les nombreuses références faites par Paule Marshall au continent africain dans son troisième roman *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Ce roman dépeint une Afro-Américaine de soixante-quatre ans souffrant d'une crise psychologique, après qu'elle a rejeté ses valeurs culturelles pendant des années. Avey Johnson doit mettre fin à sa croisière pour entreprendre un voyage lui permettant de redécouvrir son identité. Son aventure met l'accent sur l'importance, dans la vie de la femme noire, d'un passé qui commence avec le déplacement forcé d'Africains, de leur continent vers l'Amérique. Par conséquent,

cette étude revient sur la relation entre le protagoniste et le lieu de provenance de ses ancêtres. Elle place sous les feux de la rampe l'importante question des origines pour les femmes de la diaspora africaine. Elle fait recours au concept de « Tiers-espace » développé par Homi Bhabha comme outil d'analyse soulignant l'hybridité de la culture. Cet article insiste ainsi sur le symbolisme de l'Afrique dans le récit et le plaidoyer de l'auteure en faveur d'une réconciliation avec le passé. Marshall transforme un fait historique (le suicide collectif d'esclaves igbos en Géorgie en 1803) en fiction afin de mettre au premier plan l'origine africaine du personnage principal qui doit se faire pardonner par ses ancêtres, pour qu'elle puisse atteindre une certaine stabilité et un sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté répondue à travers l'Amérique et au-delà.

Mots-clés : Afrique, origines, patrie, crise, hybridité

## INTRODUCTION

Paule Marshall's third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, portrays a sixty-four-year-old African-American woman who, after several years of negligence of the values that give shape and meaning to her existence, is forced to embark on a voyage of self-discovery. This journey that takes her to the Caribbean island of Carriacou and, through a number of flashbacks, back to Halsey Street in Brooklyn, New York, and to Tatem Island in South Carolina, allows her to revisit the "roots and routes" (Rodriques 1) of the African diaspora. The need for the protagonist to reconcile with her large community lies at the center of the story. As such, *Praisesong for the Widow*, Susana Morris assesses, is "a referendum on the contemporaneous manifestation of respectability politics" (18). It pleads for a materialistic quest undergirded by an attachment to one's culture.

Marshall's narrative opens with a female character subject to psychological trauma after having seen her late great-aunt in a dream and been served a parfait for dessert, the following day. The place given to these two singular events showcases the importance of one's relations with the past. Avey's dream is indicative of the heritage she has rejected for the prospect of a better life, and she cannot eat the cake because of "the layers of accumulated wealth and superficial respectability which have left [her] bloated with false values" (Rogers 81). Marion's mother must leave the *Bianca Pride*, a symbol



of an imperialist nostalgia (Carrigan 146), before reconnecting with her ancestors.

*Praisesong for the Widow* gives a prime significance to issues of identity and home, particularly through the different references to Africa in the story, as Carissa Turner Smith implies in “Women’s Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*”. Smith rejects Paul Gilroy’s viewpoint on the origins, however, because it doesn’t tally with the fiction of black female writers (715). She thinks that Gilroy fails to grasp “the transformative potential” (727) of home, when he affiliates the concept to the origins. Home alludes to a place of origin as well as to one of arrival and is at the crossroads “between past, present and future”.

The fact that home cannot be correlated solely with one area is also supported by Janelle Rodriques in her article, “Threads Thin to the Point of Invisibility, yet Strong as Ropes”: Afrofuturistic Diaspora in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. Rodriques associates the term with the “diasporic condition” which “is a matter of kinship, not of place, as this kinship is multi- and dislocational across time and space” (1). Such an idea is discussed extensively by critics interested in Marshall’s novel. Unfortunately, these researchers usually fail to interpret how the whole mechanism works, for lack of the right analytical tool. This is where this paper becomes useful. It summons Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* to show that the multidimensional nature of home has to do with the way cultures are formed. Indeed, Bhabha highlights how the cultural text is crossed by an ambivalence which appears at the linguistic level through “the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (énoncé) and the subject of enunciation.” Therefore, “[the] production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space” (53). These words are at odds with any perception of culture as homogenous (54-5).

Cultures are by definition hybrid. They are formed through the blending of different and sometimes conflicting elements. Statements of purity and hierarchy cannot be supported, because they are not consistent with how cultural elements come to be. Earlier in his seminal book, Bhabha argues that “it is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of

domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2). The writer opposes any conception of social groups as rigid bodies formed once for all. It is through (not necessarily peaceful) interactions within (and with other) entities that new nations are created.

Homi Bhabha’s theorization of the “Third Space” provides the scholar, in her/his scrutiny of Paule Marshall’s text, with the right language to probe Avey’s crisis, particularly why her divorce from her community is not a sustainable option. This paper therefore explores the numerous allusions to the African continent in the narrative and their meaning in the life of the African-American female character. It points to the need for the black protagonist to reclaim her long-neglected cultural values in order to negotiate her integration in the United States of America. It also elaborates on the author’s response to black people’s desire to have a strong footing in America (Christian 74). Hence, the investigation undertaken here serves as a rationale for the study, in the first place, of the symbolism behind *Praisesong*’s several hints at Africa. In the second place, it offers the critical backdrop to analyze the main character Avey Johnson’s reconnection with her ancestors.

### **1. The symbolism of Africa in *Praisesong for the Widow***

Paule Marshall’s novel first alludes to Africa when the heterodiegetic narrator recounts the summer holidays the main character, then a girl, had spent with her great-aunt. The old lady lives in Tatem Island, in South Carolina, a site which is very “significant”, because of the presence on its shores of the Gullah-Geechee. This “African-American population” is “native to the Sea Islands and coastal regions of that state, as well as those off Georgia and northeast Florida” (Rodriques 6). Thanks to their geographical location (their separation from the rest of the American society) during the enslavement period, the Gullah-Geechee are perceived to be closer to Africa both in terms of their language and culture. This closeness to an African past can be seen through Aunt Cuney who is known for her attachment to her heritage. She always goes on a walk with Avey Williams to a place called “the Landing” or

“Ibo Landing” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 37). Ibo Landing is a site of memory commemorating Black resistance to oppression and resilience. As the text explains:

the name given to the location/event of a mass suicide of enslaved Igbo Africans, in May 1803 off St. Simon’s Island, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> These men and women, faced with a lifetime of slavery, either overturned their boat, or were already ashore and walked back into the water to drown, but sang as they voluntarily died, by submerging themselves in water (Rodrigues 6).

Paule Marshall has fictionalized this incident. In the novel, the space where it happened is full of memory and spirituality. The degree of reverence with which Aunt Cuney prepares for the excursion to the Ibo Landing shows the importance of the area she is about to visit. The old woman’s attire and the repetition of her act [“At least twice a week”] (Marshall, *PSFTW* 32) indicate that a whole ritual is about to happen. Though its intrinsic significance and reach are revealed further into the narrative, Cuney sets the tone of the task ahead. She puts on her hat and wears two belts with so much solemnity as if she needs enough strength to be able to accomplish a mission.

After her preparation, the matriarch, followed by her great-niece, heads to the Landing where she always recounts a sad story, one of dispossession. A group of Ibos were taken by force from their homeland to be sold into servitude in North America. Aunt Cuney heard this episode of the transatlantic slave trade from her grandmother and retells it verbatim to the young Avey Williams who embodies a different generation of African Americans. Because of that, she positions herself as a priestess, the guardian of a legacy of resistance and revolution prompting Keith Sandiford to declare that “Cuney united the functions of materfamilias to her extended family, griot and mentor to her great-niece” (374). The old lady wants to ignite in her companion a sense of belonging and pride. As the guardian of the tradition, her goal is to entrust her with a saga of rebellion against the white man’s oppression.

The Ibo miracle is an epiphany to one of the characters who witnessed the scene. Aunt Cuney’s grandmother told her heiress that once the African captives understood the white folks’ true intention, they decided to get back to where they came from by walking on the water (Marshall, *PSFTW* 39). The

African-American woman's recounting of the story proves her attachment to her African roots. Her belief in the Ibos' marvelous accomplishment is unshakeable, notwithstanding the opposition of other people in Tatem who thought that she was crazy. The old lady bequeathed the same sentiment to Cuney. Didn't Avey's grand-aunt left her congregation forever when she 'had been caught "crossing her feet" in a Ring Shout being held there'? (Marshall, *PSFTW* 33) Even if the ring shouts were performed by slaves (Morris 20), the female figure's decision to no longer take part in them is seen by Barbara Waxman as "her way of rebelling against the assimilationist Christian establishment and reaffirming her African origins" (95).

Cuney has joined the Ibos in their refusal to be enslaved and march towards home. Like her grandmother before, 'Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...'" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 39). This attitude is typically African, according to Barbara Christian who further argues:

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 of the forced displacement of blacks in the West. Ironically, how to recognize where one's mind should be, whatever the fate of the body, is presented in the novel as one of Avey's guides to becoming centered, to being restored to the proper axis from which her feet can feel the rich and solid ground. Thus, another motif in the novel, a decidedly African one, is the relationship of one's feet to the earth, so that one can stay the course of history (75).

The African-American subject is the embodiment of many disparate values. Cuney and her ancestor's experience is central to the story, because the two ladies have understood what it means to be a woman of African descent in the West. They have to remain attached to the various parts of their identity to ensure their survival.

The idea of being the sum total of different cultures is best expressed through the depiction of the area called "The Landing". The place regularly visited by Aunt Cuney and the young Avey is so symbolic because of what it represents. It is more than a space of an unrecorded miracle. The Ibo Landing gives a

strong footing to black people in the United States of America, and constitutes a manifestation of what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space” in *The Location of Culture*. To reach the sacred place, the matriarch and Avey have to first exit the inhabited surface of the island. They go past “a vast denuded land” that once was a field of cotton, which is reminiscent of African slavery in America. The two women then take another road leading to an abandoned rice field. The next phase of their walk takes them to the forest. After that, they arrive at their destination. With the forest behind and the river in front of them, they stand before a spot where the waters in Tatem meet the sea (Marshall, *PSFTW* 37). The position of the historic site is very meaningful. It is separated from the rest of the island and the American continent by a natural barrier: the forest. It is also the point of conflation of the different waterways in and around the island. This only confirms that the culture born from the Landing is at the crossroads of several values as made clearer by the comparison between the narrow pit of land and Mr. Golla Mack’s stick. The old man has “a snake carved up [the] length” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 36) of his cane; a fitting image to the cultural reality reflected by the geographical location under review. The reptile around the stick evokes the entanglements between Europe and Africa leading to the presence of millions of Blacks in the New World, a topic central to the fictional universe of Paule Marshall’s work.

*Praisesong for the Widow* hints a lot at the hybrid nature of African-American culture. Furthermore, there is a recurrent message that Black Americans have to use the past to create a viable future. This is the case when the heterodiegetic narrator recounts Avey Johnson’s reminiscence of her Sunday rituals with her husband, particularly Jay’s admiration for one Gospel group. Jerome always imitates “the Five Blind Boys” in their rendition of “Dry Bones,” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 124). The song is inspired by the vision of the prophet Ezekiel in *The Valley of Dry Bones* (*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*, Ezek. 37.1-14). It predicts the end of the African-American character’s exile, because like the people of Israel, sojourning in Babylon, s/he can envision a reconnection with the sources. However, this does not equate a return to Africa as made clear by Allan Dwight Callahan. For Callahan, the vision of Ezekiel has another meaning for the descendants of

African slaves whose forebearers were unable to go back to where they came from. Black slaves lost their freedom and “the land of their nativity” once they were sold as chattel and brought to America. To support his claim, the critic paraphrases the Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui who once underscored the fact that African slaves were not allowed “to be homesick”. Thus, though the song about the biblical allegory of the valley of bones is one of salvation for African Americans, it portrays Ezekiel as an “[exile] that never returned home” (55). Besides, not only were enslaved people forced to leave their homeland; many of them died during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Upon arrival in America, they were scattered all around the continent. It is this idea of a diaspora (expressed in the Gospel song) that explains Marshall’s allusion to Africa.

The African origin of slaves justifies the similarities between the different black communities in the Americas as Avey Johnson notices when she cuts her cruise short and lands in Grenada. On the wharf, all the people gathered around her speak Patois, and she cannot understand what they are saying. At first, Jerome’s wife feels estranged, since the language spoken by this peculiar group of Grenadians sounds unfamiliar. Yet, listening closely, she detects some commonalities between the dialect being used and another one she heard in Martinique a couple of days ago. It is the “[same] flood of unintelligible words and the [same] peculiar cadence” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 67). This is a new realization for the sexagenarian who recalls “the way people spoke in Tatem long ago.” This closeness corroborates the linguistic parenthood existing between the three social entities, and is an expression of Avey’s hybridity. For this reason, the African-American woman must reclaim the African part of her identity, before being restored to her former self.

## **2. Paule Marshall’s plea for a reconnection with the past**

*Praisesong for the Widow* depicts the crisis inherent to the rejection of one’s past and stresses the need for black Americans to reclaim their roots. The story begins *in medias res* with a main character who is subject to a state of unrest. Her discomfort starts when she dreams of great-aunt Cuney and is

served a parfait for dessert the following night. These two events, even if they seem “too illogical and absurd” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 30) to Jerome’s widow, prove Avey Johnson’s assimilation into mainstream white culture (Waxman 96) and denial of her African-American values.

In her dream, Marion’s mother refuses to follow her late great-aunt to the Landing, as the narrator reports:

Did she really expect her to go walking over to the Landing dressed as she was? In the new spring suit she had just put on to wear to the annual luncheon at the Statler given by Jerome Johnson’s lodge? (...) With her hat and gloves on? And her fur stole draped over her arm? Avey Johnson could have laughed, the idea was so ridiculous. That obstacle course of scrub, rock and rough glass leading down from the cotton field would make quick work of her stockings, and the open-toed patent-leather pumps she was wearing for the first time would never survive that mud flat which had once been a rice field. (Marshall, *PSFTW* 40)

The narrator underscores the main character’s snobbish attitude. There is a big difference between the Avey walking behind her great-aunt and this new person. Her Halsey Street years of social entrapment and economic uncertainty are now over. She has joined the middle class and no longer wants to be associated with her community.

Cuney is aware of her great-grand daughter’s refusal to renew her ties with the origins. She first encourages her, but ends up grabbing her arm once she notices that Sis’s mother won’t join her. The two women’s defiance turns into a fight which tells a lot about Avey Johnson’s current state of mind. Avey hits her great-aunt because she is no longer into the weekly visits to the Ibo Landing. Yet, the old lady’s violent reaction translates her determination to have Jay’s widow back to the realm of the ancestors. She holds Avey’s wrist firmly while hitting her back and tearing her garment (Marshall, *PSFTW* 45). This whole confrontation speaks volumes about the female protagonist’s satisfaction with her social status. Clarice’s friend doesn’t want to go with the old lady, because she refuses to look back into the past. She is content with her new position and won’t let Cuney dictate her conduct. Still, the great-aunt

is far more resolute. Miz Cuney (Marshall, *PSFTW* 36) tears Avey's attire, since it represents what prevents her from reconciling with her customs.

The night following the abovementioned surrealistic dream, the female protagonist is unable to eat the parfait she has for dessert. This is another message that her body sends her, since the main character is in a ship the name of which is an allegory of white nostalgia of an imperial past and oppression of the black community. The vessel is called the "*Bianca Pride*" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 15), with Bianca meaning white in Italian (Smith 717). One of its three dining rooms is "the Versailles" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 46), an appellation reminiscent of the French royal palace which is notorious, because of the "*many treaties [that] were signed there, in that infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the World*" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 47).

The *Bianca Pride* is a technology of separation and conquest. Boats helped Whites carry millions of slaves from Africa to America. They also played a central role in the occupation and balkanization of the Caribbean, as can be read through Avey Johnson's scrutiny of the Versailles Room. While being seated for dinner with her two cruise companions, Thomasina Moore and Clarice, an absent-minded Avey glances at the fifty tables in the room with each having a chandelier overhead and a group of six diners. During this particular moment, she has the chilling sensation of looking at fifty islands separated by "the sea of Persian carpeting" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 47). In "Preening with Privilege, Bubbling Bilge: Representations of Cruise Tourism in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros*", Anthony Carrigan interprets this scene, particularly Avey's comparing the tables with islands, in a way that is so expressive. He contends that:

The comparison of the tables with islands is "chilling" as they represent those insular West Indian possessions "divvied up" in Versailles. This symbolism is extended as the room's imperialist saturation reinforces Avey's concept of islands as paradigms of "separated" isolation. (...) it highlights *Bianca Pride's* function as a vector of "glacial" insularity, with this room's carpeted "sea" detaching passengers from each other just as the liner's onboard design distances them from external seascapes (146).



It is meaningful that this catharsis happens on a ship during a cruise, which is reminiscent of the transatlantic slave trade. After all, the *Bianca Pride* evokes different layers of separation. It functions as an island in itself, sailing on water and disconnected from the continent. It is furthermore stuck in an era during which many Africans were deprived of their freedom, and Avey's presence on board reveals that she is no longer in touch with reality. Her psychological crisis is a confirmation of Susan Rogers' words: "Avey's body communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore: her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is a crucial part of that self" (77). Marion's mother fails to decipher her current state of mind, since she has distanced herself from her own community to integrate white society.

Avey starts neglecting the past when she follows Jerome Johnson in his quest for material success. Because of the hard living conditions in Halsey Street and in order to save their marriage, the two protagonists put an end to the practices that have allowed them to maintain a sense of balance in life. No more private dances in the living room of their apartment or Sunday rituals filled with black music and poetry. Annawilda's parents have sacrificed their happiness for the prospect of social mobility. They succeed in their venture, but the pursuit of a better social status changes them for the worse. Avey notices her and Jay's estrangement from the large black community once they leave Halsey Street.

The move to North White Plains signals the fulfilment of a long-awaited dream of material acquisition, but Jerome's wife draws a comparison between it and her husband's shaved mustache. With the hair above Jay's lips gone, Avey senses that something is missing in their lives. For the first time, she feels exposed. The "little hair", though seemingly insignificant, is a metaphor symbolizing everything in their existence that is worth celebrating, and a source of protection. With it gone, Avey cannot help but being fearful. She is unconsciously longing for their former lifestyle. The private dances in her and Jay's apartment, the poems that they would listen to on Sundays, gave them a sense of belonging to the large black diasporic family. They could feel proud, because those rituals are "a necessary shield" for them, and the African-American woman is afraid of the change now that she and her

husband have distanced themselves from the past. Annawilda's mother starts longing for Halsey Street. Though they were living in dire conditions, they were still able to celebrate their cultural roots. The correlation between the shaved mustache and the forsaken rituals is a revelation of how untenable the married couple's new position is.

Avey is given the opportunity to reconcile with her origins, when the past she has tried so hard to forget catches up with her, four years after Jay's death (Marshall, *PSFTW* 134). She does not know that she is answering the ancestors' call when she decides "to cut short [her] cruise and go home." (Marshall, *PSFTW* 20) Once in Grenada, Clarice's friend becomes aware of her mistakes. At the Miramar Royale where she stays for the night, the main character is full of regrets. She and Jay have swapped an existence of celebration of and pride in their belonging to the African diaspora for material stability, by putting aside their Sunday rituals when the living conditions in Halsey Street are no longer bearable. Avey and Jerome Johnson have, from then on, been dedicated to a relentless quest for material riches. In the process, Marion's parents have lost their source of power and protection against a white majority. This new disclosure infuriates the sexagenarian mother of three. For years she has been silent about her heritage, feigning to forget "those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 139). Cuney's former protégée realizes that she is guilty for having followed her husband in his obsession with material acquisition. She now understands that they could have acted differently, because social mobility does not exclude cultural integration. In fact, *Praisesong for the Widow* is not a satire on materialism (Rogers 84). It rather pleads for the necessity to associate the search for financial stability with the attachment to one's values.

Avey Johnson must make peace with the ancestors. For this particular reason, she meets Lebert Joseph the day after she disembarks in Grenada. Lebert interprets the African-American woman's dream and troubled state of mind as signs of an identity crisis. He then vehemently asks his host to join him on the Carriacou excursion. The old man's divinatory abilities and desire to see Jerome's wife go with him on the excursion put the limelight on the centrality of African spirituality in the novel. Oneiromancy is a practice well-known in

many black communities and the protagonist needs a guide who can take her back to the ancestors, as Barbara Christian posits:

Elders in Africa and in New World Black communities are known for their ability to interpret dreams. It is no wonder Lebert Joseph is able to perform this function. But what is important to the novel's ritualistic structure is that Avey must take a step that clearly divides her recent past from her present. In calling her to the excursion in Carriacou, in calling her back to Ibo Landing, Avey's "parents" are guiding her to a deeper state of being that was always potentially hers. Thus, like Cuney, Lebert is willing to struggle with the Avey Johnson this widow imagines herself to be... (79).

To recover her true self, Avey must reconcile with the past. This is what justifies Cuney and Lebert Joseph's role in the story. They are the main character's mentors. Cuney and Lebert are what Toni Morrison calls "the ancestor[s]" in "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation". For Morrison, the ancestor is a crucial elderly figure not affected by the passage of time. S/he often impacts the other characters' lives in a positive manner and ensures the main protagonist's success. "And these ancestors", she explains, "are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343). Morrison explains that she noticed in contemporary fictional works set in cities or rural areas, the success or happiness of the main protagonist depended on the presence or absence of the ancestor. Novels characterized by the absence of this figure are marked by enormous destruction (343). This last contention adds to the role of Cuney and Lebert in the story. Under their guidance, the main protagonist is supposed to become the heiress of a culture "transcending realist narratives to preserve the past, in the present, for the future" (Rodrigues 7).

Avey accepts to follow Lebert Joseph. On the wharf and on board "The *Emanuel C.*," (Marshall, *PSFTW* 193) she has the impression of being "part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 191), a feeling she first had when, as a young girl, she went on "the annual boat ride up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain" (Marshall, *PSFTW* 188). This sensation also demonstrates that her body is becoming again "a repository of memory" (Rogers 77) that it once was. Still, the former resident of Halsey

Street must get rid of the false values she has ingurgitated over the years, and her nausea, vomiting and diarrhea are meant for helping her expunge those ideas that led her astray. In the deckhouse where she is taken by two ladies, Avey is able to gauge the ordeal that African slaves endured during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Carissa Turner Smith emphasizes that the female character can remember past events, in this part of the novel, as Paule Marshall refers to two notions: “Re-memory,” and “anamnesis”. Re-memory, “a term Toni Morrison uses in *Beloved*,” facilitates the recollection of an event when “one [constructs] a narrative about it.” It is similar to “the Christian concept of anamnesis (...) in which believers experience (in both their imagination and their bodies) events from sacred history” (722). Avey Johnson is expected to now beg for the ancestors’ pardon to have her connection with them fully restored.

The night following her arrival in Carriacou, Avey takes part in “the Big Drum” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 235). The ceremony opens with the “Beg Pardon” (Marshall, *PSFTW* 236) and continues with “The nation dances” (238) during which the old people sing and dance to pay tribute to their ancestors. In turn, they claim to be of Temne, Banda, Arada, Moko, Cromanti, Congo and Chamba origins (Marshall, *PSFTW* 238-9) so as to maintain their connection to Africa. Avey knows that the ongoing festival is just a way for these out-islanders to preserve their identity as descendants of slaves. In *Triangular Road: A Memoir*, Paule Marshall gives the same interpretation of the celebration she attended during her stay in Grenada in 1962. Those who participated in the nation dance are the heirs to the slaves “[left] stranded” on the island of Carriacou by the white masters who “sailed away to try their luck elsewhere in the Caribbean” (142). The names of social groups they are part of are “passed down through the generations.” (144).

The out-islanders have found a way to be at ease with the past. Their music, songs and dances resonate with Homi Bhabha’s words regarding the “Third Space”. The Indian critic affirms that:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or

fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew (55).

Though Bhabha's main concern is with "Fanon's vision of revolutionary cultural and political change", his corroboration of the Martiniquan's stand is in conformity with the formation of culture through negotiation. To survive in the Caribbean while maintaining the connection between them and the ancestors, the people from Carriacou know that they have to adapt African customs to an American context. Thanks to their celebration of the origins, the out-islanders are capable of "[reconciling] the many strains that have gone into making" them who they are, and their female guest has to part in the dances, for Marshall's "search" to take shape, as the author confesses during her interview with Sandi Russell (15).

The climactic moment of *Praisesong for the Widow* is when Avey finally joins the dancers (Marshall, *PSFTW* 147), a move that Susan Rogers reads as "the culmination of the process of illness, purging, and cleansing" (91). The widow is now capable of understanding the messages that her body sends her. She has always wanted to be part of a larger community. That desire, the narrator states, is fulfilled when she starts dancing. Avey Johnson feels again those very thin yet strong and multicolored threads that would "[stream] out of everyone there to enter her" while she was "waiting for the *Robert Fulton*" or standing "outside the church in Tatem (Marshall, *PSFTW* 249). As a girl, the female character could not enter the church in Tatem, because Cuney was in a self-imposed exile. In Carriacou, the African-American woman accomplishes her dream. She now belongs to a large social group scattered all around the United States and the Caribbean; a big family united by its past. This idea of the African diaspora, Kattian Barnwell opines, represents the home that Avey is supposed to reconnect with, given that the very notion of home is multilocational in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Home for the African-American subject relates to "Mother Africa". However, historical factors give another meaning to the concept. African slaves were taken from their continent to America, a place that they have occupied throughout the centuries and that they call home. So, home, for "the post-colonial individual [is] both Motherland and Other-land" (451-2). The complexity of this question resides at the center of Marshall's narrative. Even if the origins refer

to Africa, they also relate the different lands where the African slaves were brought to. Consequently, Avey Johnson's true place of residence is that "'in-between'" (2) space that Bhabha is talking about. She is now aware of her hybrid identity and can go home to the United States of America.

## CONCLUSION

*Praisesong for the Widow* is rife with references to Africa. Through the story of the Ibo Landing, Paule Marshall refers to the African continent as the original homeland of black Americans. She has fictionalized a real event to give more credit to African spirituality. The Ibo Landing is also a tale of resistance and victory against white men's tyranny. Its location is full of symbols. It epitomizes for Avey the fusion of African and western values to produce a new cultural reality: one that was born from conflict as much as from negotiation. This hybrid nature of black American culture is better perceived, as the analysis has shown, through Homi Bhabha's theorization of the "Third Space". The descendants of slaves must reclaim the African part of their identity to be fully integrated into the American society.

*Praisesong for the Widow* is an advocacy for African Americans' reconciliation with their roots. Marshall's work does not suggest a physical return to Africa, though. The main character of the novel recovers from her malaise, after she embarks on a journey that takes her to the Caribbean island of Carriacou. She finally reconnects with the ancestors. This process involves the female protagonist's flight from the "*Bianca Pride*", her disembarkation in Grenada and meeting with Lebert Joseph who convinces her to join him on the Carriacou excursion. This whole adventure allows the main character to make amends with the past.

By taking part in the "Big Drum", Avey recovers her former self. The whole story illustrates the need for black Americans to combine their pursuit of material success with a deep sense of spirituality drawn from their past. At the end of the novel, Marion's mother goes back to New York. She has rejoined a large community of people scattered all around the American

continent. This idea of the African diaspora represents the space she now occupies.

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