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"Threads thin to the point of invisibility, yet strong as ropes" : Afrofuturistic Diaspora in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Diaspora, according to Lily Cho, “must be understood as a *condition of subjectivity* [...] marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession” (14). Diaspora-as-condition is global and migratory, defined by and resultant of colonisation and imperialism, but not necessarily limited to geographical location. The literary turn to diaspora, Cho continues – of which Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984) is an outstanding example – demands and, to some extent, exemplifies a lexicon for the “complexities of connections between communities, of the unredressed griefs and disarticulated longings from which collectivities emerge,” collectivities which are “not quite nation, not quite race, not quite religion [yet] still have something to do with nation, race, religion, longings for homes which may not exist” (13). Diaspora, therefore, is not just materially experienced, is not simply a political phenomenon, but is a mode of being emergent from “deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility” (Cho 15). Paule Marshall’s third full-length novel reimagines this diasporic condition through her protagonist Avey Johnson’s arrival in Grenada – having abandoned a luxurious Caribbean cruise – and her subsequent, sudden encounter with the annual “excursion” to nearby Carriacou, for which Carriacouans resident in Grenada and elsewhere return home to “beg pardon” from their African ancestors in the “Big Drum” ritual dance. Like much of Marshall’s fiction, *Praisesong* showcases a black female protagonist somehow “finding herself” or “getting back to her roots,” but it is unique in that Avey’s roots are also routes—those of her (and the rest of the African Diaspora’s) ancestors lost to the transatlantic slave trade. Avey does not have to go “back to Africa” *per se* to find these roots and routes, but instead finds herself much closer to home – in her personal family histories in South Carolina, and in the Caribbean, a place with which she might be unfamiliar, but which is nonetheless familiar with her. Diaspora, in *Praisesong*, is a matter of kinship, not of place, as this kinship is multi- and dislocational across time and space.

Despite Avey being physically dislocated from her home, her journey(s) are primarily *spiritual*. They take place not only across space but through time, in the past, present and future simultaneously. Avey’s partial rehearsal of the Middle Passage exemplifies Marshall’s commitment to effecting “spiritual return” in African diasporic peoples (given the impossibility of physical repatriation), and to initiating readers into the challenges of reconstituting the fragmented histories of Diaspora as not merely a material, historical phenomenon but as a multidimensional state of being (qtd. in Williams 52). Ostensibly, *Praisesong* is a story of a middle-class woman past middle age “rediscovering herself” against the backdrop of an exotic/ised Caribbean tourist imaginary, but Avey comes to an understanding not only of herself but also of her community, one that incorporates and exceeds both present-day Carriacou and the memories of her childhood and earlier adult life in the United States. Past, present and future, spiritual and corporeal, Africa and “the Americas” converge on Avey at once, and Marshall uses this experience to portray not only

her protagonist's but all diasporic peoples' reclamation and reformation of our cultural and historic identities from the debilitating aftermath of slavery, colonialism and "Western" materialism. Avey, the dispersed diasporic subject, finds in attempting to return "home" to her comfortable life in New York a "real" home, in the fragmented (non)space of Diaspora – a home she shares with all black people, living and dead. She reunites herself with a history she has trained herself to deny, and with a cultural identity unfettered by limitations such as geography and "nation." This home is a free, fluid and indeterminate black identity, one that Marshall explicitly defines through her foregrounding of African cosmology, which she uses to "decode" blackness and freedom across time and space.

For these reasons—for its elaboration of multidimensional diasporic space-time through specifically African cosmology—I will be reading Marshall's third novel as "Afrofuturist." *Praisesong* is Afrofuturist, I contend, in that Avey's journey recovers "the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection;" it recreates a history for diasporic people that need not further fetishise Africa, and that revalues African mythology and religion as historical reality (Eshun 301). Afrodiasporic religion is configured, in *Praisesong*, as central to Avey's reconnection, and Marshall elevates these beliefs and practices from "fantasy" to roadmap, from myth to counterhistory and, simultaneously, alternative future. Rereading *Praisesong* as Afrofuturist incorporates but also moves beyond existing valuations of this and other black women's writing as writing of reconnection, and of Afrospirituality as recovered past, to consider this spirituality as a diasporic technology recovered from the past and projected into the future. Afrofuturism is a critical/aesthetic framework that reconfigures the fragmentary African diaspora as a trans-geographical site of potential – not only as a monument to tragedy but as an opportunity to fashion new modes and models of communal selfhood.

The term "Afrofuturism" was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1994, in conversation with black science fiction writers. He defined it as

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future. (n.p.)

This definition has since been challenged and expanded beyond the materially technological—and beyond the strictly African-American—but what remains pertinent, vis-à-vis my reading of Marshall's novel, is that one of the hallmarks of black speculative fiction remains the question of whether "a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history," can "*imagine possible futures*" (180, emphasis added). *Praisesong* ends with Avey assuming a new role for herself and her descendants, having recovered parts of

her past that were erased—the technology she uses to prosthetically enhance her future is her spirituality. Having begged pardon from her Ancestors she is armed with the tools to refashion her – and our – black being and subjecthood in the alien landscape of twentieth-century (and subsequent) modernity. This subjecthood, for Marshall, is transtemporal and transnational, a black spiritual identity that is at once a past and future technology of remembrance and reintegration.

More recently, artist Melanie McCoy has defined Afrofuturism as a concept, practice and movement that requires Africana people to ubiquitously conceptualise and deduce time from the past, present and future from an African cultural centre. This cultural centre operates as the technological component of African futures from which African people can architect their agency in memory and in practice (Atlanta Black Star).

Memory, which intrudes upon Avey's mind and body before, during, and after her cruise, operates as a healing technology against what she comes to see as the white supremacist dehumanisation of her and other black life in the wake of European-American slavery, colonialism, and capitalism. The Afrosyncretic religion into which she is initiated operates as a “hack” into a future that is truly free—of physical dimension, linear chronology, and rational/realist narrative. The critical consensus of *Praisesong* as a novel of diasporic reconnection does indeed draw attention to many of Afrofuturism's concerns, but critics have yet to read this novel as Afrofuturist, as such. Afrofuturism is a method as well as a perspective, and Marshall's pan-African cultural reclamations serve as an antidote to diasporic alienation—as a guide to future-historical correlation. Reading *Praisesong* as Afrofuturist shifts our gaze to the *future*, rather than past, with the central, inherently speculative question, “What if?”

The potentiality of myth is crucial to Afrofuturist narratives in that it is placed on level footing with what we now understand as natural science as a way of experiencing and understanding the world; Afrofuturism incorporates and foregrounds these “traditional” African understandings of humanity's relationships to each other and to our planet into its basic epistemology. In pre-colonial African societies religion, as Dorothy Hamer Denniston has highlighted, was “essential to virtually every facet of daily living. That is, religion was not institutionalised so as to separate secular and spiritual life; rather, it informed, directed, and became the very fabric of secular living” (xix). Religion, as it was understood in these societies, was socialisation. Furthermore, life in these African societies “necessitated moral involvement with and responsibility to the entire community,” including the deceased Ancestors, and so “the individual's commitment to shared beliefs and practices took on even greater significance” (xix)—the individual was understood only in relation to the community. The climax of Marshall's novel is an act of ancestor veneration, and Avey's guides on her spiritual and physical journey are her now-deceased

Aunt Cuney, who speaks to her in dreams, and the very real – yet unreal – Lebert Joseph, a man who looks so old that he gives the impression “of having undergone a lifetime trial by fire [...] to burn away everything [that] could possibly decay, everything mortal” (Marshall 161). Joseph is Avey’s ferryman (literally, he takes her on a boat) to the world of the Ancestors, and he carries Avey into the threshold between this world and the next. Avey, through begging pardon, commits herself to her community – alive, dead, African, Caribbean, American – and Marshall’s counterhistory transcends linguistic and spatial boundaries to allow for an imagining of an integrated black being outside of strict geopolitical locality. An Afrofuturistic reading of her narrative encourages us to uncover, celebrate, and harness these belief systems and their social significance(s), to fashion new – yet old – ways of seeing the world in our present moment of cultural alienation.

JOURNEYING THROUGH AN AESTHETIC

Modern Caribbean existence has always already been speculative, as 1492 indeed bore witness to a supernatural cataclysm whose aftereffects continue to be suffered globally. Enslaved Africans were forcibly transported, via the alien technology of the slave ship, to a world they could not comprehend, and from which they could not escape save through self-destruction—both physical and spiritual. Avey’s journey is a retracing, to some extent, of these journeys of estrangement from self and community, and it is no accident that Marshall’s narrative takes place mostly at sea, or on shores—in liminal spaces forever marked by transatlantic slavery and black suffering. It is not merely the slave ships, as Paul Gilroy has argued, that were sites of modernity but the Atlantic Ocean itself, which in narratives of Diaspora serves as a paradigm for the ambiguity and deterritorialisation of black being. This existential ambiguity—the “inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject,” has led to speculations of “both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come,” a counterculture suspended both within and beyond our notions of linear time that partially transcends modernity (an era ushered in by the slave trade) itself (35). Gilroy calls this a “politics of transfiguration,” but it is also the politics of Afrofuturism, “a counterculture that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own,” which “reveals the hidden internal fissures in the concept of modernity” (37-38). Afrofuturist politics transcends modernity by synchronising past and present with its aesthetic vision(s) for the future, and for Caribbean narratives in particular, as Kelly Baker Josephs suggests, an Afrofuturist aesthetic allows for an examination of “past, present, and future iterations of ‘the free,’” which in turn allows for “a delimitation of narrative” that enables authors to “sketch the psychological terrain of an emergent Caribbean cosmology” (123). The politics of transfiguration is the politics of freedom, and Afrofuturist artists imagine “the free” as beyond space-time,

beyond European concepts of “real,” “fantasy,” “science” and “technology.” This holds particular value for diasporic imaginings of the Caribbean as a “non-space” outside, but simultaneously defined by geography: as she returns to New York, Grenada seems to Avey to be “more a mirage than an actual place.” The location of her diasporic reengagement is “something *conjured up* perhaps to satisfy a longing and need” (Marshall, *Praisesong* 254, emphasis added), suggesting indeed that Diaspora is a figment of its community’s imagination, but also a powerful virus – a ghost in the machine – against the very conditions (dispossession, dislocation) that engender it.

In Avey’s fantastical, multidimensional Caribbean journey Marshall goes some way to sketching out a cosmology to which embodied, en/gendered religious experience is vital. Avey suffers *physically*, as well as emotionally, on her journey – from delirium, from flashbacks, from headaches and seasickness. In addition, the memories of her past visit her body in the present, which itself becomes a renewed site of diasporic becoming. Her spiritual rehearsal (and re-embodiment) of these journeys re/connects the scattered threads of her, and by extension our black diasporic existence, and weaves it into an intangible, yet no less real web of identity. The “technology” at work here is spiritual rather than material, and Marshall’s history transforms Africa and America—via the Caribbean—from concrete entities into “convoluted concepts, flightlines of beliefs, memories, and projections that are far too intersected to be told apart” (Mayer 558). Avey’s journey is very personal, but Marshall uses pan-African religion and mythology to universalise her protagonist’s journey, uniting Africa, America and the Caribbean into a repeating, multi-dimensional space-time. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, in his outline of a would-be Caribbean cosmology, suggested twelve integral elements: the *nommo*, a culture’s way of identifying itself, which he describes as “vibration;” the secular, “self-creating” ananse griot tradition (which includes the semi-sacred function of the trickster, on which I will elaborate below); the Vodoun (religious) aspect, *which contains all the others*; the arts of healing; the arts of divination; Carnival; Jouvert; the arts of warfare; youth groups; rites of passage; the yard, a physical, communal space in which can be found “the social, political, economic & psychological microcosm of the culture;” and the drums (3). In *Praisesong* Marshall engages with at least four of these – *nommo*, Ananse, Vodoun, and *atumpan*, the drums; she also briefly engages with the semi-sacred space of the yard. Avey must learn to identify herself (as Avey, short for Avatara, an avatar of her people); Lebert Joseph, her trickster-griot, leads the widow’s praisesong; religion pervades the entire narrative, manifesting specifically in the form of Ancestor veneration at the Beg Pardon, and in the sacrality of the trickster’s characterisation; and the Big Drum is the climax of her narrative, and Avey’s final reconnection. All of these elements come together in the “sacrosanct” space of the yard (Marshall, *Praisesong* 245), which for Brathwaite is “where Man lives, secular & sacred: the *lwa* are present or are imminent (& immanent, always) at the thresholds” (3). Crucially, Avey’s experience is religious: diasporic, transatlantic, pan-

African culture converge in a ceremony which Avey embodies, through dance, to pass from her old life into a new one.

Avey's old life was the life of her Ancestors, distilled into and personified by her Aunt Cuney, her father's aunt, with whom she had spent many of her childhood summers in South Carolina. South Carolina is significant, as it remains the home of the Gullah-Geechee people, an African-American population native to the Sea Islands and coastal regions of that state, as well as those off Georgia and northeast Florida. Given their relative isolation during America's period of enslavement, Geechee language and culture are considered more African in expression, and therefore closer to the Ancestors. When we meet Avey she is packing in silence, in the hopes of not rousing her travel companions. The reason for her sudden departure, which she dare not tell her friends, is a recurring dream she has been having for the past three nights which is causing her to feel physically unwell. In it, Cuney begs Avey to come with her to "the Landing," which we understand to be Ibo Landing, the name given to the location/event of a mass suicide of enslaved Igbo Africans, in May 1803 off St. Simon's Island, Georgia.¹ 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.

Ibo Landing has long been mythologised and retold over generations; in some versions these Igbos were still in chains; in others there was no suicide—in some retellings the men and women simply metamorphosed into birds and flew back home. Other versions, again, refer to many or no specific geographical location(s), much like the notion of Diaspora. Marshall does not treat us to the details of Avey's dream immediately, but jumps to a flashback elderly Avey is having, in the present, of (again) being told the story of the Landing, at ten years old. Aunt Cuney's memory is that of her own (as yet unnamed) grandmother's eye-witness account, in which

the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped [and] taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. [...] And they seen things that day that you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. (Marshall 37)

Despite being chained together, these Igbos, having "seen what they had seen," simply "turned [and] walked on back down to the edge of the river here. [...] When they realised there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water," continues this grandmother, continues Cuney, "they got so tickled they started in to singing." Cuney's grandmother always swore—although people thought she was "crazy"—that she, too, went with them: "my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em," says Cuney. "In her mind.

¹ I retain Marshall's spelling in quotation, and in reference to Ibo Landing as event.

Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but in her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (Marshall 37-39). This sort of psychic travel, although it is not "realistic," is common in Afrodiasporic fiction, as is having "second sight." Such tropes and methods of storytelling are integral to Afrodiasporic cultural projection, and speak to Afrofuturist concerns with transcending realist narratives to preserve the past, in the present, for the future. In the face of seemingly impossible presents, pasts and futures, Afrofuturist artists return to black African diasporic "founding myths," such as Ibo Landing, to recreate the fantastical into the futuristic. These Africans' apparent suicide is reimaged here not as their death but as their return—not as a tragedy, but a celebration. The liminal space of the shallow water is ambivalent and indeterminate, and therefore ideal for future projection. Afrofuturist speculative fiction moves through the concept of Africa as "lost" past, as geographical reality, and as alien (yet familiar) future to interweave "Africa" and "America" into a future-oriented diasporic consciousness. To read *Praisesong* as Afrofuturist is to read African spirituality as the tool that deconstructs historiography and "realism," while simultaneously reconstructing the fragments of Diaspora that this very historiography dispersed and suppressed.

Erna Brodber has drawn attention to the need for enslaved Africans to "be able to fly from the 'here' into the 'there' in order to preserve one's humanity, to move from a world you hate but have to live in to a world which you create" (20). Freedom, for the enslaved and their descendants, is a country of the mind, and this is what Afrofuturism attempts to recreate and work towards. Since Diaspora is not a tangible location these reconnections, these freedoms that Cuney's grandmother, and eventually Avey will experience, are not tangible either. However, just because they are immaterial does not mean that they are not real. In this particular flashback older Avey recalls the first and only time she asked her great-aunt how the Igbos did not drown—the only time she expressed doubt in her history. The brevity of Cuney's response, which is simply another question: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?" shames the young girl, *and* the older woman (Marshall 40).² For Avey to question her great-aunt is for her to question her own identity; her doubt marks the beginning of her separation from her people, and from herself. In (not) responding Cuney challenges the same myths that missionaries continue to use to convert Africans to Christianity and, moreover, demands of Avey (and us) that we question our own assumptions of the supremacy of Euro-Christian myths over our own. It is significant that this "clash of cultures" occurs during a point in the narrative in which time and space collapse; Cuney's story is taking place at the same time as her grandmother's story, at the same time as Avey's, in that woman's present and past, all upon and within her body. While the collapse of space-time in realist narratives is often explained as emblematic of

² Present-day Avey thinks to herself, "She had been ten – that old! And had been hearing the story for four summers straight before she had thought to ask" (Marshall 39).

a “collapse of understanding” at the heart of trauma, a moment that “registers as a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter,” we must realise that what is happening here is simultaneously a recognition *and transcendence* of trauma (Whitehead 5). What is presently traumatic about this moment, for older Avey, is her realisation that her ten year-old self refused to see and understand what was obvious both then and now: the still-living trauma of her family and racial history, and the resistance to this trauma that she has always carried within her, but that she has chosen to deny.

Ibo Landing was what Huey P. Newton would have called a “revolutionary suicide,” an expression of a “strong desire to live with hope and human dignity” (5). Life without these things was no life at all, and in physical death the “Flying Igbos,” which these men and women are also called, not only returned home but reclaimed life. They transcended the mundane to become symbols. As Keith Sandiford argues, they repossessed themselves “of the time the white slave merchants had snatched from them,” thereby validating their own survival outside of Western chronology (377). Ibo Landing is a reclamation of African cosmology in the Americas, and represents an autonomous triumph over time, as we know it. Cuney’s story speaks to precolonial African understandings of space and time, which in these societies was not linear but recurring. As Bonnie Barthold observes, “each moment embodied a recurrence of a past moment, and implied was a potential future recurrence, so long as the cycle remained unbroken” (10). Avey’s question broke the cycle, and the aftereffects of that rupture, so far in what we would call the linear past, are now being felt on her body in the present. In non—or extra—Christian Africa, and its diaspora, the relationship between the living and the Ancestors depends on personal responsibility. Neglecting this duty results in personal and/or social catastrophe—this catastrophe, and its solution, form the basis of Marshall’s plot.

After her flashback comes Avey’s dream, once again unsettling and fragmenting our chronology, and reinforcing Afrofuturism’s aesthetics of disorientation. Aunt Cuney appears, looking the same as she did when Avey was ten, entreating her niece to join her. The chronology slips further as Avey is still married in the dream, while we know her to have been widowed, in the present, for almost ten years. Dream-Avey is dressed in her best finery, about to attend a dinner in honour of her husband becoming a master mason—his being accepted into what, to them at this time, represents the highest echelons of society. This overwhelmingly white society believes that Jesus walked on water, but cannot compute Africans walking away from slavery. Cuney is urgently beckoning Avey to come with her to their home at Tatem (the site of Ibo Landing, in this narrative), but her pleas only aggravate her niece, who flies into a rage when the older woman’s tugging at her arm causes her mink stole to fall to the ground. Avey’s rejection of her old life, even in a dream, is visceral—the two women come to physical blows in full view of Avey’s neighbours in North White Plains. While Cuney has no regard for the material, Avey is willing to destroy her (aunt’s) body in defence of it – and destroy her own soul in the

process. Avey has not only ignored her ancestors, she has violently rejected them—to do so however, for pre-colonial African societies and now for future-diasporic African projection, is to reject one's own community and one's own self. It is to have no history, and therefore no future; to be cast outside of the communal process of Time itself. As John Mbiti explains, “to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals.” To sever oneself from one's community, he continues, “is to be severed from [one's] roots, [one's] foundation, [one's] context for security, [one's] kinship and the entire group of those who make [one] aware of [one's] own existence” (3). Avey may not realise it yet, but Aunt Cuney appears in her dreams to show her what she has lost, and bring her back to it.

While Avey's mind is being assaulted in her dreams at night, her body is also being assaulted during the day. She can neither eat nor sleep on this ship, as she is bombarded by semi-delirious flashbacks even when she is awake. Her seasickness is reflected in the choppiness of Marshall's narrative, which offers us vignettes of Avey's childhood and married life, arranged to demonstrate the costs of her upward social mobility.³ Avey recalls “the ridiculous dances” her husband Jay used to stage for the two of them, as well as lyrics of jazz songs they used to sing to each other, and lines of poetry from Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson (Marshall 123).⁴ Afrofuturism is referential, and Marshall uses this iconography as a trail of crumbs from which readers are to construct an aural/oral diasporic history. Abena Busia comments that readers from different parts of the diaspora may attach different significances to different references in the novel, but will ultimately be able to draw parallels from their shared sources and experiences. *Praisesong*, she continues, “requires of us that we have a knowledge of ‘diaspora literacy,’ an ability to read a variety of cultural signs of the lives of Africa's children at home and in the New World” (197).⁵ This “diaspora literacy” is the project of Afrofuturism, which according to Dery “speaks to our moment because it [...] offers a mythology of the future present, an explanatory narrative that recovers the lost data of historical memory” (n.p.). This “lost data” – songs, poetry, religious observances – are not so much lost as submerged, and are employed in the Afrofuturist project to create and sustain, to challenge us “not to look at literary or cultural artefacts as abstraction, but as a concrete aspect of our lives,”

³ The narrator makes much of Avey's luggage – six luxury suitcases for a seventeen-day trip – and fine clothing (Marshall 16). For all intents and purposes Avey is the epitome of material success, but readers are immediately made aware of the tensions between Avey's luxurious present and her materially poor, but spiritually enriched past.

⁴ Avey also recalls the spiritual nature of their lovemaking, and Marshall compares her protagonist to Erzulie, Haitian lwa of love, beauty and passion; Yemoja, patron saint of mothers and motherhood, and mother of all the Orishas; and Oya, “first wife of the thunder god and herself in charge of winds and rains” (Marshall 127). The sacred is also the sensual – and sexual – in this narrative.

⁵ Busia borrows the term “diaspora literacy” from Veve Clark (1991).

and to see the act of reading as “an exercise in identities,” an “understanding and acceptance of the demands of the past” that we can transform into a gift for the future (Busia 197). Avey is convinced that she will feel better once she returns to the safety and luxury of North White Plains, and indeed when she has disembarked—when her black body has been deposited on a Caribbean shore—she does start to feel physically better. But her journey is far from over: this is only the first stage in her spiritual “homecoming,” for which she must be cleansed and purged, and still further harrowed.

FINDING A WAY BACK HOME

When she disembarks Avey is *not* met by the tourist’s expectations. Instead, she sees ordinary people going about their business, paying her no mind as a wealthy American. She is further agitated at the sight of well-dressed, “respectable” people about to board old, rickety ships that she describes as “relics” (Marshall 66). What irks Avey most is these people’s familiarity with her—she is so cut off from her diaspora that she is confused, not relieved that no one regards her as a stranger, nor treats her with the respect (read: admiration) she feels her status should afford her. Avey rejects these people even as they accept her, even though their speech reminds her of the creole her aunt (and she) used to speak. When Avey finally does reach a hotel (an exclusionary space, isolated from her people at the harbour) the flashbacks return, and she begins to blame herself for forcing her husband to commit himself to chasing “the American dream,” leaving his (their) black identity behind. She now regards leaving their small apartment in Harlem as “an act of betrayal” (Marshall 122), and laments that she and Jay “could have done both,” both brought themselves out of poverty *and* preserve “the most valuable part of themselves,” their spirits (Marshall 139). Marshall is heavily invested in portraying the pursuit of material gain as the loss of spiritual being; we watch Avey and her husband—whom she now calls Jerome Johnson—slowly lose their affection for each other, in their affectation of “progress.” In her memory Avey no longer sees this as a history of self-improvement but as a slow process of spiritual decay. She remembers at her husband’s funeral how she did not see him exactly, but “that other face with the tight joyless look” (Marshall 133); the man she buried was not the man she married, and “Jay’s death had taken place long before Jerome Johnson’s” (Marshall 135). Bame Nsamenang outlines three phases of selfhood in an African worldview:

a spiritual selfhood, which begins at conception, or perhaps earlier in an ancestral spirit that reincarnates. It ends with the ceremony to confer a name on a newborn. A social or experiential selfhood continues the cycle from the rite of incorporation or introduction of the child into the human

community through naming, to end with biological death. [...] An ancestral selfhood follows biological death (295).

I contend that Jay's social phase ended before his biological death, and that Avey is suffering from her own spiritual sickness, as a result of what Orlando Patterson has described as "social death." Moreover, both Jay's and Avey's progression to ancestral (ultimate) selfhood appears to have been stunted. This rupture in self progression is what haunts Avey now, and what Marshall's novel seeks to address, and hopefully begin to heal. Avey will, after suffering in her past and present, eventually fashion a more integrated future, a social life after death.

While they may have never been in physical chains, Jay and Avey are, as Patterson has argued of the enslaved, socially dead, "culturally isolated from the social heritage of [their] ancestors" (5). Slaves had no value, or even recognition apart from as the property of their masters; they were "social nonperson[s]," a status marked, among other things, by name changes, enforced dress codes, head shaving and loss of their rituals and languages (6; 8-9). Avey apparently can no longer speak her creole, and both she and her husband have changed their names—Avey is a shortening of "Avatara," which was Cuney's grandmother's name, and the couple's assumption of Jay's full, "government" name indicates the loss of their familiarity with each other. During the course of their marriage they also lose many of their old friends, and they stop visiting Tatem. Lastly Jay, after moving to North White Plains, shaves his moustache – Avey reflects, in her memories, being filled with "such dismay, and even fear" at the sight of him afterwards, as with this loss came "the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on him," the white mask on his black skin that reappeared to Avey when she buried him (Marshall 130-131). Avey is only able to mourn her husband's death in Grenada, ten years after the event in linear time (again, time is durational), and she blames herself for catalysing Jay's death. She mourns for herself, also, for the loss that cannot be articulated but which can only be embodied.

Yet while slaves could not reclaim their identities by the standards set by their masters Avey can reclaim hers, through diasporic Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism sets different standards for reclamation of identity, standards that allow for fluidity and fragmentation, standards unbound by linear time. This is the standard that Brathwaite envisioned for Caribbean aesthetics, too, when he asserted that "our concepts and models [...] should be applied not only to the outer field of reality, but to our inscapes equally." Caribbean literature, he continued, should and does reflect the region's and its people's inherent "instability, plurality/ambivalence, dependence [...] this social reality may be as much figment as fragment: result of our own apprehension of reality" (4). These fragmentary figments are Diaspora itself, are Caribbean—are Afrofuturist—aesthetics.

SPINNING THE WEB

When Avey emerges from her hotel room the next morning she is not, as the narrator suggests, a “*tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written” (Marshall 151). Instead of being “emptied out” or “wiped clean,” she has taken the first steps towards a re-engagement with her past, in order to re-order her present and future. In fact, Avey has been “filled up” with (counter)memories, which counteract colonial policies of washing African minds “clean,” purging ancestral cultural knowledge with European linguistic, epistemic and physical violence. In any case, Avey’s recovery is only fleeting – when she finds herself in Lebert Joseph’s bar she is exhausted (ostensibly from the heat), and takes refuge in the cool, dark, but shabby interior, that has the “hushed tone of a temple or church” (Marshall 159). We are primed to expect some sort of religious experience from this encounter but Lebert, when he sees Avey, is irritated by her presence, and curtly tells her that the bar is closed. The narrator describes him as “a stoop-shouldered old man with one leg shorter than the other.” He is old and slight, yet moves “with a forced vigour that denied both his age and infirmity. And his hands, large, tough-skinned, sinewy, looked powerful enough to pick up Avey Johnson still clinging to the chair and deposit her outside” (Marshall 162). This man’s appearance is not to be trusted, but even this brief description recalls Papa Legba, the aged Haitian avatar of Esu Elegua, the Yoruba god of the crossroads, who became infirm during the Middle Passage. Esu/Legba is known throughout the African diaspora as the messenger of the gods. He speaks all languages, and guards all knowledge. He is the first of the Haitian lwa, and all invocations must go through him, all ceremonies must begin with him. In Cuban Santería, Elegguá represents the beginning and end of life (and time)—he guards the thresholds between past, present and future. The Yoruba recognise Eshu, with his slippery, interdimensional movements, as a trickster. He delights in pranks that disrupt order and rend social fabric, if only to mend it again—indeed, when Avey finds Lebert, he is holding a needle and thread, which he had been using to mend some old clothes. Papa Legba is also frequently portrayed holding a set of keys—to the past, present and future—as it is he who must open the door to the Ancestors and to the divine. When Avey finds Lebert, however, he is trying to lock her *out* of his bar.

As the trickster Lebert is prone to mood swings. He brightens significantly—mercurially—when Avey asks him to explain the Carriacou excursion. He is also closest to the Ancestors, as he proclaims that, with the name Joseph, he is related to all Carriacou people, alive and dead (Marshall 163). His symbolic (narrative) function is to explain the relationship to (and bridge the gap between) those of us in the present and those of us in the past and future. He is indeed the guardian of Time, Marshall’s patron saint of Diaspora. He insists upon the vital importance of honouring the “Old Parents” (his term for the Ancestors) because

if not they'll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute, you know. [...] Oh, they can be disagreeable, you see them there. Is their age, oui, and the lot of suffering they had to put up with in their day. We has to understand and try our best to please them (Marshall 165).

As Legba is the first of the lwa, Lebert boasts that he is the first in line for the Beg Pardon every year, and that he roasts a fresh ear of corn, lights a candle, and sprinkles rum outside for the Ancestors—practices of tribute with which those familiar to Afro-Caribbean religious practices would easily recognise. Avey is disconcerted by all his talking, though, and dismisses these observances as “voodoo” (Marshall 166). She still cannot see the significance of this ancestral connection, but soon will, as will Marshall's readers.

Lebert's mood swings again when he asks Avey “What's your nation?” and she replies that she is from New York (Marshall 167). He has grandchildren he has never met in “those places,” and who will never hear of, much less participate in, the excursion. It grieves him that his descendants have been lost to him, and cut off from the Old Parents; to Avey, he seems to have physically shrunk. She may not be able to understand how and why, but Avey also feels the old man's loss, and at this juncture we too are encouraged to pause to mourn the fragmentation of the Diaspora. Avey, still confused from her trip and from the heat, fills the silence with her account of her last few days, as she would to a priest in a confessional. She fails to notice, while talking,

the change that had taken place in the old man. [...] his head had come up, his eyes had opened and he had begun quietly studying her from beneath his lowered brow. His gaze never left her face [...]. There was no thought or image, no hidden turn of her mind he did not have access to. Those events of the past three days which she withheld or overlooked, the feelings she sought to mask, the meanings that were beyond her – he saw and understood them all from the look he bent on her (Marshall 171).

Avey says much, and there is even more she does not say, but Legba knows all. He sees “how far she had come since leaving the ship and the distance she had yet to go,” and how far Diaspora has to go to be fully integrated (Marshall 172). He knows her past, present and future, just like the flying Igbos; this time his mood changes to one of compassion, when in an echo of Aunt Cuney he asks her to come to his Landing, Carriacou.

Avey's first response is to panic, but as soon as she thinks of returning to North White Plains her body revolts against her, again. As she tries to calm her nerves, she notices that Lebert has “developed a little nervous tic,” an “almost imperceptible rocking from side to side” (Marshall 182). It calls to Avey's mind “the wand of a metronome or a hypnotist's finger” (Marshall 228), and signifies this man as a keeper of Time. She agrees—or rather, her body

agrees for her—“and as she said the words she realised that the strange discomfort in her stomach was gone and her head had stopped aching” (Marshall 184). Avey is being forced to understand that the spiritual is very much also the corporeal. Her mind starts to clear as Marshall’s narrative returns to the past, this time to boat trips Avey used to take on the River Hudson as a child. This is one of the first times she can remember true black community and communion. She recalls, when surrounded by black people, Americans like herself as well as immigrants of all kinds, feeling

what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And the threads went out not only to people she recognised from the neighbourhood but to those she didn’t know as well [...] Then it would seem to her that she had it all wrong and the threads didn’t come from her, but from them, from everyone on the pier [...] issuing out of their navels and hearts to stream into her (Marshall 190-191).

Here Marshall offers an Afrocentric, Afrofuturist view of community. As Ifeanyi Menkiti observes, a person is defined “by reference to the environing community” (171). Avey remembers, in her flashback, that she exists because her community exists, and that they are all intricately, spiritually and physically connected. “The reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories,” Menkiti continues, “and this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. [In] the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory” (171-72). Avey remembers that she has forgotten that kinship is transhistoric and transgeographical – again through the medium of water. Indeed, to quote Brathwaite, she recalls that “the unity is submarine” (1).

In Marshall’s example, however, the unity is also divine. These “silken” threads are a nod to the Anglophone (and Dutch-speaking) Caribbean trickster Anancy, whom Patterson has argued is “the *only* folk hero in the Afro-Caribbean” (133). In the Caribbean Anancy is both a spider and a man, descended from the Akan spider-god Ananse, the trickster-hero of that culture’s pantheon of deities, and the integral self-creator of Brathwaite’s Caribbean cosmology. Christopher Vecsey asserts that “Ananse is related to Nyame [the Akan Supreme God], first, by name. Nyame is sometimes known as Ananse Kokuroko, or the Great Spider, and some Akan think of the two as relatives” (166). Anancy has been credited with bringing knowledge into the world (much like Legba) but, according to Vecsey, “he does so only through anger and accident” (171). Nevertheless, Akan storytellers believe that “the wisdom of the spider is greater than that of all the world together” (qtd. in Barker and Sinclair 25). A popular Anancy story is how he released wisdom (or stories) into the world by accident as, in his attempt to hoard all wisdom for himself in a calabash

and hide it in a tall tree, the calabash fell from his neck, and wisdom escaped. He and his web, therefore, are associated with trickery and greed, as much as they are with wisdom and creativity. The figure of the spider is particularly symbolic for post-plantation culture as, as Patterson continues, “the spider is a migrant. It can live anywhere [or] nowhere in particular, for the spider carries its home, its only real home, buried in its belly” (134). For the descendants of those violently separated from their homes, who today cannot identify those homes as physical or material, the spider/trickster can be an emblem of deterritorialised selfhood and community. This is why, Marshall suggests, young Avey feels kinship with West Indian and other migrants, brought together by the ship(s), and held together by the spider’s web. For Brathwaite, the spider “has the brain in its belly and creates its own road, the spider creates the road on which it moves through the web” (8). Anancy the trickster is therefore the guardian of Caribbean culture, which “can be seen in terms of a dialectic of development taking place within a seamless guise or continuum of space and time, a model which allows [for] and contains the ambiguous, and rounds the sharp edges off the dichotomy” (7). Diaspora culture is migration culture, and it makes sense that a being without a home – or one that exists at the threshold(s) between worlds (or rooms)—would come to emblematised this culture. It is the Caribbean’s diasporic discontinuity—Anancy’s trickery—that fosters creativity, and that creates culture from scattered fragments.

Shanna Greene Benjamin argues that the spider’s threads function as “a culturally, psychologically, and spiritually reintegrative force.” “Aunt Nancy,” as the spider trickster is remembered in parts of the United States, brings together that which has been separated (like Lebert with the sewing needle), and keeps diasporic fragments from dispersing completely. Marshall weaves these “epistemological, geographical, and mythical threads” together, continues Benjamin, to form “a web of nationhood [that] includes an extended family of transplanted Africans”—those from Avey’s neighbourhood, and those from farther afield (51-52). The author brings (Aunt A)nancy and Esu-Elegbara together in the figure of Lebert Joseph, and in the imagery of marine travel, to demonstrate that what ties (or weaves) Diaspora together is not stasis but movement – particularly movement over (and through) water. Moreover Diaspora is spiritual: it is intangible, subconscious, but real, based on shared experiences *and memories* of dispersal and displacement.

In this way we see, too, that the trickster is profane but also sacred as, while they may be transgressive, it is through their transgressions that a society can come to (re)define itself. Lebert “tricks” Avey into going on the excursion with him, and the old man’s very movements confuse her: he is a shape-shifter, erratic and unstable, but it is through Lebert/Legba/Anancy that Avey and her community will eventually be restored to wholeness. Marshall’s choice of the motif of religious experience again emphasises the centrality of religion, or rather spirituality, to her Afrodiasporic narrative of reconnection, the centrality of spirituality to pre-, and perhaps post-colonial African identity formation. Her choice of the trickster illustrates her engagement with “the profound and more

obscure longing of the human psyche for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting: a revolt against a whole complex of ‘givens’ coded into a society” (Van Sertima 445). As Van Sertima continues, the trickster can, as a tool of diasporic spiritual future technology, defy the dialectic imposed upon us by colonialism, as a fluid and free revolutionary energy that can “see from within, act from within, move from within the roots of its world, to *re-root* that world, so to speak, to point the way forward to a new course” (451).

Legba’s function in Fon life, according to Robert Pelton, was that of mediator, to ritualise and consecrate all transactions. The sacred trickster’s agility and “metaphysical slipperiness” represent “a truly sacred power that works through divination and sacrifice to restore lost wholeness;” this is the function that Lebert fulfils in Avey’s life (126-27). I read Marshall’s trickster as Afrofuturist as he, as does Afrofuturistic art, focuses on the

intersecting imageries of pastness and future in black culture, setting out not so much to rewrite the history of the African diaspora, but to systematically deconstruct it [...] Afrofuturist narratives explode the confines of historiography and realism, collapsing established patterns of signification and identification, and put forth undecipherable [*sic.*] codes and fractured images (Mayer 564).

Lebert is indeed indecipherable. “Avey Johnson failed to recognise him” as he leads her to the yard (Marshall 232), as he appears to be “of an age beyond reckoning” in one moment, and in another he “[shifts] to his good leg [...] throwing off at least a thousand years as he did” (Marshall 233). The trickster is by nature misunderstood, but this failure of understanding is in fact the “collapse of long-standing symbolic systems – not in order to replace them, but to expose them in their constructedness and arbitrariness” (Mayer 565). In the trickster, past, present and future collapse, “not so much in order to reconstruct a lost history [but] to dismantle the established one and give scope to altogether different, highly fantastic scenarios instead, which are as much of the future as they are of the past” (Mayer 566). The often contradictory, seemingly destructive actions of the trickster often serve to reintegrate our arbitrary distinctions between past, present and future: Avey calls Lebert “an apparition” (Marshall 233) and reflects that, “with 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 232). Marshall’s trickster is Afrofuturist because he manipulates Time to recreate future African Diaspora.

It is Legba/Lebert who, for the first time carrying a walking stick (a symbol of Legba’s former phallic power), unlatches the yard gate for Avey “with great ceremony” (Marshall 233). Legba opens the gate for prayer – no Vodoun ceremony can begin without the refrain “*Papa Legba, ouvri barrière*

pou' mwê" – and no fete can begin without Lebert Joseph.⁶ He looks even more stooped, more jerky in his movements as he escorts her to the fete, and their walk, in the dark, reminds Avey of walks in Tatem with her aunt. Time continues to disintegrate for Avey, and as she steps into the yard she feels the Ancestors manifest and congregate, in the form of flies and mosquitoes. The Big Drum, the climax of her journey, does not appear to be as great as its name suggests, but Avey feels "neither disappointment nor anger." Instead she is drawn to

the restraint and the understatement in the dancing [...] the deflated emotion in the voices [...]. It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing [...] All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums [...] And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself (Marshall 240).

It is not some essence of historical Africa that Afrofuturism seeks, but to engage with, and create out of, the *state of longing* that characterises Diaspora. These "bare bones" and "burnt-out ends" are Marshall's fragments of Diaspora (Marshall 240). These are her thin threads, "the theme of separation and loss" and "unacknowledged longing" weaved into the music of the drums and the bodies of the dancers (Marshall 244). Avey's "subliminal memories," Marshall continues, "had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they'd come." Her "essential," embodied knowledge has triumphed over her systematic, "rational" denial of it, and found her across (inside) the sea of Diaspora. She has finally answered her aunt's call to come – to Carriacou, to Tatem, and to Harlem simultaneously, which are all present in, and sanctified by, the yard. Avey joins the dance, which she remembers in her body like the Ring Shouts she used to dance in Tatem—as Gilroy argued of the politics of transfiguration, this connection is "magically made audible in the *music* itself," as it exists "on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words [will] never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth" (37, emphasis added). Avey responds unthinkingly to the drums, described by Brathwaite as the "vibraheart of *nommo*," the very heart of her name, her essence, her being (16). Avey remembers her name, as her great-aunt had taught her, "Avey, short for Avatara" (Marshall 251). This is what Eshun called "African sonic processes [that are] reconceived as telecommunication, as the distributed components of a code to a black secret technology that is the key to diasporic future" (295).

⁶ Marshall opens Part III of her novel, the 'Lavé Tête,' with this incantation, which translates to "Papa Legba, open the gate for me" (Marshall 148).

The trickster is the keeper of this telecommunication technology, his spider's web: Avey feels, "for the first time since she was a girl [...] that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly coloured threads" that span the length and breadth of Diaspora. These threads are invisible, but embodied, and connect her to all of her people, living and dead; "their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends" – even in the face of an unwritten and unwritable history, in the face of the unmeasurable tragedy of transatlantic slavery (Marshall 249). Marshall's novel is itself a praisesong, for all the children of Diaspora. It is a song of possible futures, Afrofutures.

CONCLUSION

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* is an expression of Diaspora as a condition of longing, which Avey feels within her body as both spiritual and physical malady that she must exorcise through the embodied practice of dance. Marshall incorporates African understandings of religion, community, time and space to illustrate the lasting effects of enslaved Africans' various survival strategies to preserve and protect themselves in the past, and their descendants in the present. These beliefs are what now constitute Caribbean culture – and the building blocks of Diaspora. Afrofuturist aesthetics seek to reclaim these building blocks, and repurpose them as spiritual, narrative, material and aesthetic technology for the projection of a future black identity, recreated from these "lost" fragments and thin, invisible threads. The future we project for ourselves needs must reclaim the dead, who are at once the living, and Avey comes to "beg pardon" for her past, and end her despair for her future. Lebert indeed opens the gate for Avey – and for us – to evaluate the recent past, assess present needs, and position ourselves within the complex web of relations, and immeasurable and speculative space/time, that is modern Diaspora.

Afrofuturism is the reclamation and recalibration of these "bare bones" of tradition, and the synthesis of these remnants into a new skeleton, or roadmap, to the future. Avey goes home--to Tatem first, and then New York—to teach her grandchildren what her great-aunt taught her: Papa Legba opened the gate for her, and she will open the gate for others. She has learned that she can exist at once in her time and beyond it, and that her story—our story—need not be limited by historiography. The Beg Pardon is a ceremony of countermemory, one that "[reorients] the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective" (Eshun 289). This is the Afrofuturist mission, and reading *Praisesong* as such allows for an appreciation not only of past but also *future* African identity as an identity unbounded by geography, but un-located in the "cooperative 'in process' space between the past, present, and future of an integrated black diaspora," that both interrogates and celebrates the heterogeneity of blackness, and "engag[es] said heterogeneity in service of envisioning a future black world" (Josephs 130).

Praisesong seeks to address the questions of how we got here, where here is, where we came from, and what we must do now that we are here. These are the central questions of Afrofuturism, which envisions a utopia of freedom, with a conscious remembrance (and reverence) of the past.

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