

Cultural Identity and the Search for Self in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow



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ABSTRACT: Through the lenses of psychoanalytic literary criticism, this study foregrounds reconciliation with one's cultural heritage as instrumental to inducing self-actualization. The article finds, with the analysis of the choices of Avey Johnson and her husband, that in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the African American protagonists' ascent to middle-class respectability culminates in disillusionment. For in the process, they succumb to Western cultural ethics at the expense of their own identity as people of African descent. Understandably, the paper postulates that happiness is not the fruit of financial and material accumulation, but the gratification of a soul craving to discover the self.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage, cultural identity, African Americans, self-actualization, journey

INTRODUCTION

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* deals with identity crisis, as it highlights how the New World Africans stumble on the 'shameful stone of false values' that govern the Western world, a world where materialism and selfishness prevail, respectively, over spirituality and the spirit of togetherness. The novel chronicles the life of a middle-aged African American woman Avey and her husband Jerome Johnson, who, to escape the trappings of poverty and social invisibility that characterized their early marital years, make wrong choices and costly sacrifices. In their pursuit of material security, Avey and Jerome sever ties with their cultural heritage and their community, hence, turning their back to the most basic things that define them as people of African extraction. Unfortunately, this self-negation results in a spiritual disorientation vividly reflected in the character of Avey Johnson, who the reader identifies on the novel's first pages as a woman with a fractured psyche who has lost her peace of mind.

This study illustrates how the cultural heritage of Avey and Jerome is fundamental to inducing African Americans' realization of self in a hostile Western culture. It postulates that the key to their happiness is not acquiring anything from the outside as the materialistic American society assumes, but the gratification of a yearning soul in search of the self. With the emphasis on the protagonist's progress, the paper builds its analyses around the trope of journey which is the backdrop of Marshall's novel.

A host of scholars show interest in *Praisesong for the Widow* and the spectrum of issues they raise testify to the author's remarkable artistic genius. Recurrent among these are the themes of identity formation, diasporic consciousness, African Americans and the problematics of cultural preservation, cultural heritage and spiritual wholeness, and many more. For instance, in "Identity Poetics and Cultural Genetics: Mapping Dance and Memories in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," Mariame Wane Ly (2022) observes that "[t]he novel conveys the exertion of recovering an African cultural legacy in a country subjugated by exclusive WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] cultural norms" (30). She concurs with Ashma Shamail (2017) who propounds that the main challenge of the protagonist is that "Avey never tried to maintain her cultural ties with the past and felt content with the trappings of the middle class. In fact, this very rejection of her heritage cast her as a culturally displaced figure" (22).

This paper agrees with both scholars as it postulates that the protagonist's downfall results from the cultural displacement of Avey and her husband Jerome, who succumb to the seductions of the American bourgeois culture. By way of consequence, it validates these words of Otsi F. Basse (2021) who echoes Marshall's caution against "materialism as bait that steals away the happiness of the Africans in the Diaspora and also as an agent of colonialism poised at subduing non western cultures" (107). The latter highlights the novelist's agenda as revealed in *Praisesong for the Widow*—and in her oeuvre in general—which is to salvage the African American heritage through unearthing and/or recreating, even if fictional, its bonds with the ancestral land: Africa.

Several other scholars, including Courtney Thorsson, Shanna Greene Benjamin, Isiah Lavender III, and Dhanashree Thorat, also acclaim this redemptive endeavor. These researchers have in common the fact that they focus their analyses of the protagonist's redemptive progress on the cultural expressions and the ritualistic processes that Avey Johnson undergoes. Thorsson (2007)

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highlights the dance celebrations as being powerful to reunite the protagonist with her ancestors and her community members in a shared diasporic culture (644). As for Lavender III (2009), he underscores Lebert Joseph's role as a cultural trickster—the human representation of Papa Legba—designed by Marshall to “influence Avey enough to give up materialism for spiritual connectedness,” and so to recover herself (110). In a similar breath, Benjamin's (2005) work locates the presence of the West African cultural trickster Ananze, the spider—Aunt Nancy in African American and Afro-Caribbean folklore—rebuilding the broken history of Africans of the diaspora as it weaves the web of reintegration that leads lost sons and daughters back home. In her “Oral Traditions: An Analysis of Story Telling and Performance in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*,” Thorat (2011) posits: “the oral traditions in *Praisesong for the Widow* give Avey a sense of belonging to the African diasporic and African American community, help her recreate and reclaim her cultural heritage, and finally, preserve the experiences of the enslaved Africans and their descendants in North America” (1). Thorat underlines the power of oral tradition and its preponderant role in African Americans' cultural redemption. The points these scholars make are pertinent to the present study. But while it acknowledges the problem of cultural displacement inherent to the African American community as Marshall portrays in her narrative, the paper is rather concerned with the significance or the value of the African American cultural heritage and how it is intermeshed with Avey and Jerome Johnson's quest for happiness.

Once again, this study uses the trope of journey as a crucial motif in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Kavon Franklin (2016) affirms that “*Praisesong* is replete with journeys. (...) Throughout the novel, Marshall uses journeys as a device by which African Americans make emotional voyages to connect with their roots (...)” (56). Many other researchers, whose points space will not allow to present, share the same view—reference is made here to Gay Wilentz (1990), Elizabeth McNeil (2009), to cite but few. These critics mainly retrace Avey's journey to Carriacou as a process of healing and self-recovery from the debilitating aftermath of Western cultural subjugation. The paper expands the scope of analysis further by focusing on the Johnsons' journeys as a whole. This encompasses their pursuit of the American Dream of social mobility, their fall to middle-class materialism, and Avey's progress to redemption, which can be put together as the journey to self-actualization.

The paper relies on Psychoanalytical theory to analyze the actions and reactions of Avey. This theory holds that human experience cannot be fully understood if the unconscious is overlooked. And Lois Tyson (2015) expounds that it is a storehouse of sensitive data, crucial to understanding ourselves: “[T]he unconscious isn't a passive reservoir of neutral data, [but] rather [...] a dynamic entity that engages us at the deepest level of our being” (13). In the same breath, this paper navigates the protagonist's journey(s) as the reflection of her unconscious craving to reconcile with the self. It postulates that chasing material accumulation—what the dominant culture extols—does not lead to self-actualization. Therefore, the work reveals in the first place that the Johnsons' pursuit of happiness proves fruitless because they forsake their cultural heritage, which is a living part of them. Secondly, it demonstrates that Avey Johnson's strenuous peregrination to redemption is definitely a search for self.

1. Cultural Identity and the Pursuit of Happiness in *Praisesong for the Widow*

Most Americans believe that happiness is conditioned by the ability to ascend to a level of social respectability characterized by financial power and material abundance. But *Praisesong for the Widow* defies this widespread belief through the experience of Avey and Jerome Johnson. Although they make it to the middle class, these characters fail to find the promised happiness. Ostensibly, Marshall's protagonist, the African American woman named Avey Johnson, is a character who meets all the conditions of a fulfilled person: she has a desirable social position and is financially self-sufficient. She is wealthy enough to spend her vacations on luxurious cruises. Every summer, for instance, she spends over fifteen hundred dollars on a two-week trip for leisure. On the cruise ship, she is a first-class passenger, stays in a large deluxe cabin (Marshall 11), and “[goes] to dinner (...) in the Versailles Room, the most formal of the three dining rooms on board” (46). Her lifestyle is a display of material abundance as visible in the wealth of her dresses: six suitcases for clothes to be away for only two weeks. Ponder the following extract: Her skirts, blouses and summer suits were done. The sweaters and stoles she drew around her when the weather on deck turned chilly had been packed after a fashion. Crowded into the wrong bag were the linen shirtdresses she wore on excursions ashore in place of the shorts and slacks favored by the other women her age on board, no matter what their size. Her shoes were in their special caddy. Her hats in their cylindrical box. And she had just disposed of her underthings. All that remained were her ensemble dresses and evening gowns. She was down to the last of the six suitcases. (13)

Avey Johnson and her husband belong to the African American elite who have achieved the American Dream of social upward mobility. In effect, from the status of a poor family in a rented apartment on Halsey Street, they move to a house of their own in North White Plains, a neighborhood that symbolizes middle-class success. They see their children through and secure enough for their old days. Their wealth becomes so considerable that at his death, Jerome bequeaths Avey “...the house in North White Plains and the large corner lot on which it stood, and the insurance policies, annuities, trusts and bank accounts that had been left her, as well as the small sheaf of government bonds and other securities which were also hers, and most of all the part interest guaranteed her for life in the modest accounting firm on Fulton Street in Brooklyn which bore [Jerome's] name” (88). But after they ascend to this desirable social stage, Avey and Jerome are left with a feeling of disillusionment and regret.

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As evidence, there is no trace any longer of "the woman [with] headstrong ways and high feelings [whom] Avey Johnson" used to be (11). Likewise, the Jerome, or rather "[t]he Jay who emerged from the music of an evening, the self (...) [who] was open, witty, playful, even outrageous at times" gives way to a lifeless man with a sealed face and a tight joyless look (95, 133). 'Tight', 'joyless', 'sealed', and 'lifeless' all testify to the death of joy and happiness in Jerome Johnson. Avey regrets the demise of her affectionate husband as she painfully realizes that "Jay's touch increasingly [becomes] that of a man whose thoughts [are] elsewhere [...] Love like a burden he want[s] rid of" (129). As readers, we can relate to the disappointment of the Johnsons. Though everything about them speaks of success, happiness is an elusive reality, a mirage for them. Conversely, their achievements laid the ground for their downfall. What is more regretful is that their fall eventually leads to irreparable damage: the untimely death of Jerome. A powerless Avey laments: "Jay. He went about those years like a runner in the heat of a long and punishing marathon, his every muscle tensed and straining, his body being pushed to its limits; and on his face a clenched and dogged look that was to become almost his sole expression over the years" (115). While society regards him as a fulfilled person, Jerome dies an unhappy man leaving behind a widow also dead on the inside, who tries unsuccessfully to fill in the gap with luxury and glamour. The gravity of Avey's condition is up to the extent that:

on occasion, shopping in her favorite department store she would notice a black woman of above average height with full-figured yet compact body coming toward her amid the floor-length mirrors down the aisle. And in the way she always did she would quickly note the stranger's clothes. The well-cut suit, coat or ensemble depending on the season. The carefully coordinated accessories. The muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age (48).

The narrator relates a strange incident that has become commonplace in the protagonist. It is about her inability to recognize her image reflected in a mirror. This betrays an advanced level of self-estrangement. In other words, the woman whose reflection she sees in the mirror is a stranger to the woman she is, i.e. her natural self. According to Susan Rogers (2000), there can be two explanations for this: "It may be that Avey's mirror image is so blandly respectable that she does not recognize any distinguishing features there. (...) [Or] it could be that Avey has so taken on board the mind set [sic] of whiteness that she does not recognize her blackness, that she appears to herself as Other" (84). Either way, this incident underscores a fractured psyche: Avey is torn between two irreconcilable identities: the Ancestral African identity and the mainstream Eurocentric identity. As a result, she is not at peace with her self. Mary Lederer (1993) supports that "[s]he has tried to assimilate into a society from which she is categorically excluded. Her estrangement from her own self parallels her invisibility in that society" (70). Lederer makes a crucial point here. The truth of the fact is that Western society is not 'Afro-friendly'. No wonder, after the heavy price she pays to 'buy' her acceptance into that culture, Avey discovers much to her regret that she is not wanted. The last sentence of Lederer's excerpt validates the following observation of the protagonist herself: "They [are] like islands [...] even those who [sit] directly facing her at the nearby tables somehow gave the impression of having their backs turned to her..." (47). Victim of social invisibility, Avey is slowly dying of loneliness, notwithstanding the company of her best friends Thomasina and Clarice and the fanciest cruise experiences they treat themselves to. As a consequence, she has become "someone who k[ee]ps her thoughts and feelings to herself" (48), for nobody seems to notice she is there and no one is ready to hear, let alone share her concerns. All things put together, the Johnsons' tableau reads disappointment, disillusionment, and failure, for there is no trace of happiness, despite these years of social ascension. Whatever they might have gained is nothing but an empty opulence.

It can be argued that the Johnsons' pursuit of happiness proves fruitless because, in the process, Avey and Jerome get disconnected from their cultural heritage, which is the most essential part of who they are. Thus, it is not their financial abundance per se that caused their downfall, but the fact that in the process, they are cut off from their roots. Avey and Jerome broke contact with their ancestry, their history, and their identity as people of African descent: "Running with the blinders on they had allowed that richness, protection and power to slip out of the living room, down the stairs and out of the house, where it had vanished (...) in the snowy wastes of Halsey Street" (137-138). Among other things, they put a stop to their yearly visits to Tatem, in South Carolina. Beforehand, "in summer, by way of a vacation, they used to take the bus down to Tatem (changing to the Jim Crow seats in the rear once they reached Washington) and stay in the old house [Avey's] great-aunt Cuney had left her" (115). This vacation trip, more than a time of relaxation, is an occasion for their cultural renewal and spiritual rejuvenation, essential to keep them moored in the traditions of their forebears. Marshall's choice of South Carolina as a setting for this ritual is historically significant. Up to date, South Carolina "remains the home of the Gullah-Geechee people, an African-American population native to the Sea Islands and coastal regions of that state (...). 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" (Rodrigues 6).

For Avey Johnson finding herself in Tatem was a way of keeping with the tradition of her Great-aunt Cuney—the ancestral figure in her life—who formally demanded that the parents send Avey to spend every single summer vacation in Tatem, where she was trained in the knowledge of her origins. At the center of their conversations was the story of the Ibo Landing, which the old woman told Avey repeatedly with the same emotional enthusiasm. The Ibo Landing "indicates the locus where Igbo people disembarked in 1803 and drowned in the sea, repudiating the mere idea to submit to slavery in the United States" (Wane Ly, op. cit., 27). According to the report of Aunt Cuney's grandmother, who is believed to be a witness of the event, the Ibos, upon

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debarkation, took a good look around. After that, they turned their back on America, and fearlessly walked, still in their chains, through the waters back to Africa under the helpless gaze of their master: "...They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em and walked on back to the edge of the river here [...] They just kept walking right on out over the river" (38). Commemorating the Ibo Landing in her narrative depicts Marshall's commitment to bringing to the forefront the unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of slavery. Indeed, the Ibo Landing evokes resistance, spirituality, power, genuineness, and authenticity endemic to African culture. It showcases what Huey P. Newton would have called a 'revolutionary suicide,' an expression of a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity because life without these things is no life at all (qtd. in Rodriques, op. cit., 8). The Landing opposes a counter-narrative to the univocal discourse of the dominant culture which casts African slaves as helpless and submissive to their oppressors. Contrary to the negative clichés spread about their intellectual and rational abilities, Aunt Cuney told Avey that they are people who have spiritual powers and sightedness that transcend time. She said: "...those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead" (37-38). As a matter of fact, it is thanks to their uncommon spiritual endowments that these Ibos resolved to and made their way back home, unafraid of their owners and ready even to cross the ocean on foot, because "they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today" (38).

Entrusting Avey with all this knowledge was a way for Great-aunt Cuney to initiate the young girl into the tradition of her ancestors, and this by the medium of orality—a mode of knowledge transmission Africa is renowned for—just as she received it in her turn from her grandmother. In remembrance of the old woman, she kept telling Avey: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (39). These Ibos for Aunt Cuney's grandmother—and Cuney of course—are reminiscent of Africa, i.e. their fathers' land, the place they hail from and which determines their real identity. Thorat opines: "the oral traditions in *Praisesong for the Widow* give Avey a sense of belonging to the African diasporic and African American community (...)" (op. cit., 1). Seeking to preserve the authenticity of this identity, Cuney insistently reminded Avey among other things that "whenever anyone in Tatem, even another child, asked her her name she was not to say simply 'Avey,' or even 'Avey Williams.' But always 'Avey, short for Avatara'" (251). By so doing, the elderly woman revived Avey's sense of self, her consciousness of her heritage and history. Cuney's mentorship can be summarized in these words of Lebert Joseph: "Just because we live over this side don' mean we's from this place, you know. Even when we's born here we remain [African] people" (163-164). Therefore, for Avey, the summer visits to Tatem evoke Aunt Cuney—now dead—and the traditions and knowledge the old woman passed on to her. More than a vacation trip, it was a spiritual and cultural refreshment and renewal pilgrimage of their ties with their heritage. When she put an end to these visits, Avey psychologically killed Aunt Cuney and all she stands for. Unfortunately for her, it took a toll, for, as Toni Morrison would say, "when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (qtd. in Bassey, op. cit., 107).

Before their downfall, Jay was a man highly committed to his race. In those days, when he was back from work, his first act after greeting his wife was to turn up the volume of the phonograph. Then "he would lower his tall frame into the armchair, lean his head back, close his eyes, and let Coleman Hawkins, The Count, Lester Young, work their magic, their special mojo on him" (94). There was an exception when it comes to the blues. He "never, no matter how exhausted he was, sat down when listening to the blues records. As the voices rose one after the other out of the primitive recordings to fill the apartment, he would remain standing, head bowed, in front of the phonograph" (94-95). This solemn posture before the phonograph playing the blues carries at least two or three important messages. His bowed head is an act of acknowledgment and a tribute paid to the memory of his ancestors. For a reminder, the creators of the blues were none but his forefathers brought as slaves from Africa to America. Following African customs and traditions, this posture also epitomizes respect and submission, the right way to comport oneself in the presence of elderly people. In this case, Jerome is portrayed as a polite young man listening carefully to words of wisdom spoken by elders represented here by Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Big Bill Broonzy, Mamie Smith, etc.

Jay's standing position can also be regarded as a display of his allegiance to the core message of blues music. Named after a word that means sadness (blue), blues is a musical genre that reflects the melancholy and the yearnings of the African American people who have suffered slavery and segregation for centuries in the United States. It is a music of resilience to Western cultural subjugation. Understandably, Jay stands, on the one hand, 'with' his race amid their hardships and, on the other hand, 'for' justice and equality for African Americans as citizens on equal footing with European Americans. Hence, he shows his eagerness to go to the very end: "By the time [the last record] ended and he carefully replaced it in the album with the others, his head would have come up (...) He would be ready then, once the album was back on its shelf in the bedroom closet, to sit and listen to the other records" (95). Jay had a unique consideration for his cultural heritage and his house was some sort of a sanctuary where this heritage is celebrated and a museum for its preservation. Recalling memories, Avey remembers that Jay kept Sunday mornings for poetry recitation. In the middle of their living room before his wife and his children, he would perform: "'I built my hut by the Congo and it lulled me/to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids/above it...'"—with a raised hand he indicated their great height, their grandeur" (125, italics in original). The verses above are extracted from Langston Hughes's poem 'The Negro Speaks of

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Rivers,' which is a praise song in honor of the African landscape, the land of Jay's ancestors. By these Sunday morning performances, he sought to perpetuate the oral tradition of cultural transmission. He ensured to bequeath his children what he had learned as a boy because "[t]he schools up north didn't teach colored children anything about the race, about themselves, he used to complain" (125).

Unfortunately, just like his wife, he will lose footing on the ancestral nurturing ground in the pursuit of material acquisition. As a result, even things that meant so much to them have been abandoned on the sidelines in a search to gain white respectability. Jerome had no desire to be identified with his culture anymore. For this purpose, he silenced the voices of Afro singers and poets in his house. In their stead, all that could be heard are degrading and derogative talks such as: "The trouble with half these Negroes out here is that they spend all their time blaming the white man for everything" (134-135) or "[i]f it was left to me I'd close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum!" (132). The latter declarations are evidence that just like Avey, Jerome has betrayed his race and turned his back on his own. This authenticates Rogers's affirmation that their "moves toward the material security they associate with white, middle-class acceptability go hand-in-hand with erasing or alienating themselves from blackness" (op. cit., 83).

The Johnsons' quest for the American Dream leads eventually to a cultural suicide. As a result, the happiness that defined them before vanished, leaving, on the one hand, an ungratified Jerome who will die of stress and, on the other hand, a regretful Avey, who is unable to enjoy the wealth of possessions they have acquired. This leads to saying that African Americans' happiness and spiritual fulfillment are not dependent on their social status, but on their connectedness to their heritage. As Avey will find out but too late, there is "something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power..." (137). One understands that their cultural legacy plays a greater role than entertaining their daily routine. It is the umbilical cord that joins them to the ancestral nurturing ground and ensures the transfer of life. Accordingly, when they forsake it, they experience a spiritual death. Their quest resulted in disillusionment, not because they failed to achieve their dream of social upward mobility, but, basically, they did so at the expense of their cultural heritage. Undoubtedly, [t]he novel does not [...] present material well-being as synonymous with cultural disinheritance. It does not offer a critique of material advancement in itself, but rather when it exists at the expense of cultural identity" (Rogers, op. cit., 84). It is therefore important to find ways and means to claim one's self for self-expression.

2. Reclaiming Self and Affirming Personal Identity

As seen, journey is the main fabric of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Avey Johnson, the lead character, embarks on many journeys which take place simultaneously through space and through time. From childhood souvenirs to her marital years, from the past to the present, and from Tatem to Halsey Street to North White Plains, she is on an unending move. Rodrigues concurs: "Past, present and future, spiritual and corporeal, Africa and 'the Americas' converge on Avey at once (...)" (op. cit., 1). At first glance, Avey Johnson's multiple journeys appear as a sign of the protagonist's freedom and also as a symbol of financial power. However, upon careful examination, they encode a profound malaise; they betray a disrupted mind as evidence of the character's restlessness. Shamail confirms: "Avatara's journeys signify the dislocation, disruption, and disintegration of African descended people from their communities and from each other" ("Mapping" 185-186). The writer portrays her condition through the metaphor of undigested food. We read that on board the cruise ship, Avey has the feeling of a "mass of undigested food stalled not only in her stomach but across the entire middle of her body. [...] Oddly enough there [is] no nausea or pain, nothing to suggest sea-sickness" (51). This feeling is the corporeal manifestation of her spiritual dis-ease, an outlet of the voice of her unconscious that she has so far tried to suppress because she is not willing to face her inner conflicts. In fact, in the first part of the novel titled 'Runagate', Avey is trying to sneak away from something she cannot tell. It is this unknown thing that forces her to cut short her trip on the Bianca Pride and decide to fly back home, where she expects to find solace. Though Avey herself cannot put a finger on something specific, her unconscious reveals that she is actually 'haunted' by her past or her real self whom she has tried to escape for the past thirty years spent in an attempt to assimilate into bourgeois White America.

It is worth noting that some days before this digestive discomfort, Avey saw her late Great-Aunt Cuney in a dream beckoning her to a walk to the Ibo Landing as had been their ritual every August when she was a girl. But she refused to take a single step forward, which obliged the old woman to force her: "In seconds a hand with the feel of a manacle had closed around her wrist, and she found herself being dragged forward in the direction of the Landing" (43). In this dream, Aunt Cuney is the representation of Avey's ancestral background which is calling her to reunite with her cultural heritage symbolized by the Ibo Landing. But just as she reacts in the dream, Avey has turned her back on that past and is not ready to change her mind. This conflicting relationship with her cultural self is what is reflected in the malaise she feels in her body. But the truth is that when she endeavors to escape her past, Avey is actually trying to flee from self to seek refuge in something that is a shadow of herself. And this is what she fruitlessly struggled to achieve for the past thirty years when, along with Jerome, she rejected her African identity in favor of Whiteness which she covets as a treasure. Daniel Tia (2020) laments such a mindset and the havoc it still causes African

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Americans: "Sad to say, the prejudices incorporated in colonial discourses, especially the inferiority of Blacks and their cultures, keep on influencing their social conditions up to now" (181). The matter of fact is that this parochial vision of American society is intentionally manufactured by the dominant white class to maintain Western cultural ascendancy. So, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Avey's moves testify to an unconscious urge that the character longs to satisfy because the artificial identity she has constructed will not help. However, instead of taking her far away from her past, as she so wishes, it is interesting to note that her journeys always send her back to herself. "She [feels] like someone in a bad dream who discovers that the street along which they are fleeing is not straight as they had believed, but circular, and that it has been leading them all the while back to the place they [are] seeking to escape" (82-83). This journey in a circle exemplifies the cyclic conception of time as pertains to African cosmology, where past, present, and future are one and intricately inseparable. Marshall hereby seeks to dispel the queries that surround metaphysical realities inherent to the African culture such as the ancestral incarnation and the interactions of the living with the dead and to set these truths on the same pedestal of credibility with what is tagged 'scientific' and 'rational' in the Western world.

Back to the motif of journey or travel, Avey turns to the Bianca Pride summer cruises after a failed pursuit of happiness and the death of her husband. From New York, the ship takes her on a tour of the Caribbean Islands. She leaves the United States as a dejected and disappointed woman and heads to the Caribbeans which happen to be her homeland—her parents are from the West Indies. From a geographical perspective, this move signals an unconscious yearning in Avey to unite with self. Moreover, when she walks out on the cruise in Grenada, even though her initial resolution was to catch the first plane home, i.e. New York, she will alter her plans. In effect, in her hotel room that night, she confronts herself in a retrospective analysis of the past thirty years and the choices she and Jay had made over time. She ends up acknowledging with bitter regret that they have missed it: "*Too much!* What kind of bargain had they struck? How much had they foolishly handed over in exchange for the things they had gained?" (139-140, italics in original). And for the first time, four years after his death, Avey mourns her husband in loud, wrenching cries. This episode marks a key point, in that it shows the first signs of the protagonist's awakening. It is crucial to underline that this awakening begins only when she accepts to confront—no more to avoid—herself and to admit their past failures and voice her regret. In this connection, Karl Jung asserts that "if the translation of the unconscious into a communicable language proves successful, it has a redeeming effect. The driving forces locked up in the unconscious are canalized into consciousness and form a new source of power" (qtd. in Scarboro 28). By way of consequence, it is the first time that the protagonist is relieved of the strange feelings that have haunted her since the beginning of her journey. The following morning will see a new type of Avey. Evidence is that she feels as if her mind "had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written" (151). Even outwardly, the change is notable as testifies the desk clerk of the hotel, who, upon seeing her wondered: "Could this be the same well-dressed black woman with the half-dozen suitcases who arrived the day before?" (153).

The place of occurrence of such a key incident in the life of the protagonist is not fortuitous. It does not happen in the comfort of her house in New York or on board the luxurious Bianca Pride cruise ship, but it is only when she sets foot on the land of her fathers (the West Indies) that Avey starts recovering herself. This is another piece of evidence that the protagonist was indeed searching for herself. When the time comes to leave the hotel, instead of traveling back to New York as planned, Avey Johnson cancels her flight and follows Lebert Joseph on a yearly excursion to Carriacou, a small island in the heart of the Caribbeans, her homeland. This last move offers some food for thought. In effect, Avey Johnson meets the old West Indian man for the first time in a rum shop on the Grenadian beach. In their discussions, Lebert introduces the Carriacou Excursion and bids the woman to join him on the trip. Before the end of the day, Avey is persuaded by a 'stranger' to drop her initial plans and follow suit into a place that she never knew before. This is astounding. And yet, as curious as it might look, this quick yielding to Lebert's will is the confirmation that the protagonist is led by an interior urge that drives her to her homeland to reclaim and recover her identity.

Recovering self entails discoveries and rediscoveries, unlearning, and relearning. Key in this process is the definition of one's identity: who you are. It comes then with no surprise that one of the first interrogations that usher Avey into this new phase is to find an answer to the question "...what you is?" which Lebert Joseph asks her after she is welcomed in his rum shop (166). Beyond an inquiry about her name, occupation, country of origin, family status, etc., Lebert's question is fundamentally existential and deeply meaningful. The old man aims to capture Avey's sense of self overall. But to his amazement, the woman in her sixties is not able to say who she is or 'what nation she is'. This implies that Avey does not truly know herself, in other words, she is ignorant of her history. In fact, her case is that of a cultural displacement, which is accentuated by her own words: "I... I don't know what you're talking about... what you're asking me..." (167). Indeed, as a descendant of the transatlantic slave trade, Avey is separated from her roots before birth and has always been exposed to a Western dominant culture that she eventually embraced as hers. However, the truth of the matter is that she is an African American, i.e. at the origin, she is African. In her culture, contrary to the Western tradition, where you are born does not determine who you are. Your real identity has to do with your parents' origin. This being said, it is not surprising that Lebert Joseph, after a lifetime spent in the Americas, still claims his identity as a Chamba, a West African ethnic group. But he notices with regret that many African descended have lost track of their background: "You's not the only one, oui,... It have quite a few like you. People who can't call their nation... You ask people in this place what nation

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they is and they look at you like you's a madman" (174-175). For Lebert, these identity-centered discussions are instrumental in enticing the protagonist to the next step, notably, her decision to try the Carriacou Excursion, which suggests her willingness—even if unconscious—to know/to redeem herself.

Marshall has constructed Lebert Joseph to be a substitute for Avey's great-aunt Cuney, another type of ancestor to carry on the mission of leading the inexperienced Avey Johnson to reconcile with herself, after the death of the first ancestor figure. In effect, while Cuney stops at telling Avey her ancestors' story, Lebert leads Avey further to have contact with her ancestral legacy. As a matter of fact, on her way to Carriacou, she recollects her past through a psychological projection into the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Precisely, she undergoes a miniature of the sufferings African slaves were subject to during their enforced migration to the Americas. When the boat reaches the 'two current channel'—an imagery of the Middle Passage—Avey's body starts to react unfriendly. She first vomits in long loud agonizing gushes that weaken her body (204). Following that, she feels a strong and uncontrollable urge that compels her to soil herself on the spot, just like her ancestors on slave ships were compelled to because they were chained on the same spot and sometimes in a single position for weeks. Diarrhea and vomiting are generally recognized as the body's reaction to internal troubles, mainly gastric ones. Though they are not pleasant to experience, they can be helpful to some extent, in that they purge the stomach and bowels of waste and toxins which are harmful to the body. In the same way, Avey's purge in this scene signifies that the protagonist is rid of the false values she had fed herself with and the fake identity she has tried to emulate so far. "...the regurgitation and defecation of the bloated mass clogging her stomach symbolizes ridding the internal body of the remaining dregs of the middle-class excess" (Lavender III, op. cit., 118). After that, Avey has a psychosomatic experience that helps us better understand her discomforts. When she is carried to rest in the deckhouse, even though she is lying down alone,

she [has] the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it [feels] like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she [is]. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarg[e] upon the ones filling her head." (209).

In this experience, Avey sees a vision of slaves packed on a ship at sea and she happens to be one of them. She feels the terrible condition they are in and can hear their moans and cries. This vision is evocative of the horrors of the Middle Passage. This unpleasant history is her story and constitutes an essential part of her identity, no matter how hard she endeavored to blot it out these last decades. On this matter, Marshall cautions that "one must accept the past, no matter how painful and chaotic it is because 'you have to psychologically go through the chaos to overcome it'" (qtd. in Shamail, "Mapping", op. cit., 183). One can argue that this is what the writer has Avey do in this journey to Carriacou, which is a reversed form of the Middle Passage. In fact, her experiences are some sort of baptism. If, according to religious requirements, getting baptized is a way for a believer to identify with their newfound faith, Avey's baptism in the waters of the Middle Passage stands for her unification with her ancestral heritage. 'Crossing over' to Carriacou can therefore be perceived as a rite of her initiation into the lineage of her forebears, i.e. the men and women who were forcefully carried in the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World centuries before she was born. After this episode, Avey is free from the strange stomachache that beset her from the beginning of her journey: "Her body under the sheet covering had remained motionless. Flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when she awoke yesterday morning..." (214). This leads to saying that the fulfillment and the inner comfort the protagonist has always yearned for does not lie in escaping her history, but in her reconciliation with herself.

Recovering her history and rebuilding ties with her ancestry culminate in the redemption of her community and her personal identity. On the night of the Big Drum, Avey steps forward to join the circle of dancers in the middle of the field and, for the first time since her girlhood experience, she sees the vision of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads "streaming out from the [...] people around her in Lebert Joseph's yard. From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts" to enter her, making her part of what seem[s] a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity (249). The reappearance of what can be termed 'fraternity threads' symbolizes the restoration of bonds of unity between Avey Johnson and her community, which encompasses the whole of the African diaspora in the Americas, all the coheirs of the history of the transatlantic slave trade. As a confirmation of this reunification, Avey is able to join in the performance of the Carriacou Tramp. Truly, it is her feet, of their own accord, that begin to perform the glide-and-stamp rhythmic trudge. Even though she had not learned it before, she performs the moves in perfect harmony with the elderly people on the periphery of the big circle of dancers. The impulsiveness of her dance steps underscores the inborn cultural bonds that link Avey to the people of Carriacou, which can be regarded as a microcosm of the African diaspora. It is evidence of Avey's reintegration, which is a prerequisite for her to recover herself.

Through her interactions with Lebert Joseph, Avey has learned that the African conception of identity is different from the Western point of view. As a matter of fact, while the Western world views a person only on an individualistic basis, the African person is a man/a woman of his/her community. In other words, "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, and this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically but also in regard to epistemic accessibility" (Rodrigues, op.

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cit., 14). This means that she is who she is first of all in relation to the community she belongs to. In layman's words, she owes her people who she is. Lebert Joseph's self-presentation is one of the best illustrations of this affirmation:

Lebert Joseph... Well, that's me. I's a Joseph, oui! [...] 'From Ti Morne, Carriacou. The oldest one still living from that part of the island, if you please. Near everybody in Ti Morne is family to me. [...] I's also family—close family—to the Josephs at Plaisance and Bushnell and Friar Village, Carriacou. As well as those living in Maribel and up Green Hill. And I's a far-distant relation to the ones at Spring Hole and Meridien over to the other side of the island. As for that crowd of Josephs living out at Walker's Bay, they all got to call me... (163)

In the preceding, Lebert demonstrates that he belongs to the Josephs, he descends from their lineage and owes them who he is. This explains why Avey needed to redeem her history and her community before she recovered herself.

After this first step which is of utmost importance, the protagonist successfully traces her real origin as a descendant of the Arada, a West African people who hailed from the ancient Kingdom of Allada, in southern Benin. As Lebert tells her: "Something about the way you was doing the Carriacou Tramp there toward the end put me in mind of people from that nation" (252). Paulette Brown-Hinds (1995) explains the historical foundation of Lebert Joseph's affirmation: "During slavery, both in the United States and the Caribbean, dance and music became a unifying cultural element for the transported Africans. [...] those that lost personal nationhood or tradition could reclaim it through an affinity to a particular drum beat that possessed the power to reassign one to a nation" (113). From this point on, we notice that Avey's sense of self has changed. Her answer to the question "And who you is?" is no more simply 'Avey' or 'Avey Williams', but "Avey, short for Avatara", as her great-aunt Cuney always insisted (251). "That Avey now recognizes herself as Avatara, is also essential to [her reconstruction], for in African cosmology it is through *nommo*, through the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence. By knowing her proper name, Avey becomes herself" (Christian 82-83, italics in original). Moreover, claiming the name Avatara is an assertion of her devotion to the mission that came with that name. For a reminder, Avey has been named after Cuney's grandmother Avatara who came to Cuney in a dream with precise instructions concerning the child's destiny months before Avey was born. She was sent, Avatara said, by Cuney's great-grandmother with the mission of "transmitting the spirit and survival of the culture in the New World from one generation to the next" (Shamail "Mapping" 181). The following excerpt reveals that the woman is fully committed to that cause henceforth. On leaving Carriacou, Avey Johnson f[inds] herself thinking of the house her great-aunt had left her. By the time the plane touched down in Grenada she h[as] made up her mind to fix it up. Or if it was beyond repair to build a new one in its place. Sell the house in North White Plains [...] and use the money to build in Tatem. [...] The place could serve as a summer camp. And each summer she would ask that her two grandsons be sent to spend time with her in Tatem, [...] she would lead them, grandchildren and visitors alike, in a troop over to the Landing" (Marshall 256).

Eventually, Avey reconciles with her cultural identity as an American of African origin, a descendant of slaves, precisely from the Allada people of West Africa. She was born by the wish of her ancestors and sent on a particular mission as a depository of her cultural heritage. As a consequence of this reconciliation, her story ends on a happy note: she is free from her inner conflicts and self-estrangement of the past thirty years. In confirmation, the corporeal ailments that torment her from the inception of her journey come to an end. This establishes that Avey and Jerome's pursuit of these years was a search for self. Understandably enough, the happiness they tried to build by gathering material abundance will escape them until Avey comes to terms with her cultural heritage, i.e. with the self.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper has been to question America's promise of happiness as a fruit of hard labor. In the light of Avey and Jerome Johnson's experience in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the study has demonstrated that what mainstream America labels 'success' can be far distant from self-fulfillment. In effect, it has revealed, in the first place, that Avey and Jerome achieved the dream of social mobility but failed to enjoy it because they undermined their cultural heritage. Secondly, the work showed that Avey eventually achieved self-fulfillment when she reconciled with her cultural background. The paper finds that the quest for success should never lead African Americans to deny their African heritage which remains essential for their self-realization, for "the African part of their identity is as important (and certainly more steadfast) than their status as Americans, and rejecting this facet of their heritage is to risk becoming like Avey during her lowest point: a stranger to herself and spiritually at sea" (Franklin, op. cit., 56). Indeed, the American bourgeois ethic is founded on purely capitalistic and materialistic principles, and it has no regard for spiritual values. As a consequence, when Avey and Jerome subscribed to this culture at the expense of their own, they paid for it dearly. Ultimately, this article holds that self-fulfillment is fundamentally the fruit of reconciliation with the self, but cultural rootlessness will take a toll.

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