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Pauline Amy de La Bretèque

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Pauline Amy de La Bretèque

1 “She felt 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 were seeking to escape” [*Praisesong*, 82-83]. Avey Johnson, the main character of Marshall’s 1983 novel, is indeed drawn to a winding path throughout the book – a path that will eventually lead her back to her forgotten origins. This passage not only echoes Avey’s constantly deviated journey (from the cruise ship to Grenada, then from Grenada to Carriacou) but also the sinuosity of the plot and of Marshall’s poetics.

2 The notion of excursion is central in the novel. The term, as it appears in the novel, designates the Carriacou excursion during which the people from the tiny island of Carriacou who live and work in Grenada go once a year to their home island on an excursion. A Grenadian taxi driver explains to Avey: “Every year this time every man, woman and child that’s from the place does pick up themselves and go. They don’ miss a year. No matter how long they been living over this side, even they’s born here, come time for the excursion they gone” [*Praisesong*, 75]. Furthermore, the notion of excursion implies an expedition or a short trip, but also a movement out of a planned course or axis, a deviation from the norm. Excursions are essential to *Praisesong for the Widow* as they affect the main character as well as the novel’s plot and poetics. Errancy, which implies straying from an expected course, echoes the forms of excursion. The protagonist of Marshall’s novel wanders from one place to another as she is led by the people she meets and by the hazards of her journey back to the United States. Identities evolve in relation to other identities. In errancy, as well as on excursion, they are transformed through contact with other cultures and new forms of knowledge.

3 Throughout her errancy in the Caribbean, the protagonist is confronted with different people and cultures, which at the end she recognizes as familiar. Memory resurfaces
Through this process of errancy. Through the creation of links with others, identities evolve and ‘creolize’, as analysed by Edouard Glissant: “toute identité s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre” [Glissant, Poétique de la relation, 23]. Avey’s identity can change and develop through the confrontation with others. Straying from expected courses, identities leave room for encounters and relations.

Edouard Glissant’s notion of errancy illustrates the memorial process which does not follow a pre-established path but implies constant drifting. For Glissant, errancy can be identified as the resistance to the fixity of meaning inherent in colonialism:

L’errant récuse l’édit universel, généralisant, qui résumait le monde en une évidence transparente, lui prétendant un sens et une finalité présupposés. […] La généralisation est totalitaire : elle élit du monde un plan d’idées ou de constats qu’elle excepte et qu’elle tâche d'imposer en faisant voyager des modèles [Glissant, Poétique de la Relation, 33].

Memorial recovery is necessarily connected to the confrontation to alterity and to the unpredictability of the relations created on such excursions. What Glissant calls “la pensée de l’errance” connects with Marshall’s exploration of rhizomic and floating identities. Glissant borrows the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux between the notion of root and the notion of rhizome: the single root kills everything around and is exclusive, whereas the rhizome allows connections: “le rhizome s’étend à la rencontre d’autres racines” [Glissant, Introduction à une poétique du divers, 59]. Glissant’s notion of errancy sheds light on the importance of wandering in the process of memorial recovery in Praisesong for the Widow.

Similarly, in Praisesong for the Widow, memory participates in the construction of the feeling of belonging to a diaspora and to the creolization of identity. The novel explores Avey Johnson’s acceptance of her origins. As an upper middle-class African American living in New York, she follows two of her friends on a cruise in the Caribbean. After only five days she suddenly decides to leave the cruise, to go to the closest island and to take a plane back to New York. This sudden urge to depart is provoked by a dream about her dead Aunt Cuney from Tatem Island in South Carolina with whom she would spend holidays in the summer when she was a child. Aunt Cuney and she would take a ritual walk to the sea and more particularly to a place called the Ibo Landing, where, during the times of slavery, slaves from Nigeria rebelled and drowned in the sea. Her aunt’s version of the story is that they walked back all the way to Africa. In the dream she refuses to follow her aunt to the Landing, showing her rejection of her African origins. To integrate into the American society, Avey and her dead husband felt compelled to reject their African-American cultural legacies (music, literature and historical consciousness). While willing to go back to New York, she encounters in Grenada an old man, Lebert Joseph, who convinces her to go with him on the yearly ritual excursion to the small island of Carriacou. Avey develops there an awareness of her African origins and a responsibility as a carrier of memory. This article explores the emergence of the sense of belonging to an African diasporic community and the winding path to memorial reconstruction in Marshall’s novel.

Avey’s memory is perforated by silences as she tries to forget her relations to the history of slavery in the United States despite her daughter’s constant reminders. Filling these silences appears as a real struggle in Marshall’s novel since social pressure had led the main character to repress her memories linked to African-American culture. She slowly and laboriously reconstructs her past from the few traces that are left in her mind. “Sometimes the least thing seen or heard during the day, or merely
thought of in passing, could trigger a dream of people and events long forgotten” [Praisesong, 67]. Avey Johnson’s vague memories from her childhood in Tatem, such as the dance steps of the Ring Shout, her aunt’s story about the arrival and rebellion of the Ibo slaves in South Carolina, or even the nation dances performed by the inhabitants of Carriacou are only traces of the past, but from which memorial reconstruction can be undertaken. A new creolized identity might emerge through the claim of African cultural legacies. Through these fleeting traces of memory, Avey connects with Caribbean cultures and becomes aware of the complexity of her diasporic identity.

The motif of the trace is central in Edouard Glissant’s memorial quest. With the slave trade, new identities emerged in the American colonies at the cost of the African identities lost in the Middle Passage: “Les Africains, eux, arrivent dépouillés de tout, de toutes possibilités, et même dépouillés de leur langue. [...] Mais [ce migrant] a fait quelque chose d’imprévisible à partir des seuls pouvoirs de la mémoire, c’est-à-dire des seules pensées de la trace, qui lui restaient : il a composé d’une part des langages créoles et d’autre part des formes d’art valables pour tous” [Glissant, Introduction à une poétique du divers, 16-17]. These traces illustrate the cultural continuities between the Caribbean and Africa also underlined by Edward Kamau Brathwaite:

African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not pure African, but an adaptation carried out mainly in terms of African tradition [Brathwaite, 192].

Brathwaite argues that the African continuity in the Americas can be restored in what he calls the “literature of reconnection”: “what I mean by the ‘literature of reconnection’: a recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as root living, creative, and still part of the main” [Ibid., 255]. Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow is undoubtedly part of this literature of reconnection between the individual and his or her African origins and between the American cultures and the African heritage across the Atlantic.

Yet, Marshall’s novel points at the difficulty to accept this cultural continuity in the United States. Echoing the issue raised by Gilroy about the “effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” [Gilroy, 3], Marshall explores the necessity to adopt a new identity with fixed values to be part of the nation of the United States, renouncing any other cultural heritage. Avey therefore struggles between material comfort in her middle-class American environment and the appeal of her origins.

This article approaches memorial recovery and reconstruction through what I call Marshall’s poetics of excursion and errancy. To what extent are memory and cultural identity inscribed in a poetics of excursion and errancy in Praisesong for the Widow, and memorial recovery into the central motifs of excursion and errancy in Marshall’s novel? I will first analyse how cultural alienation connects to physical errancy in her work. Then, I will focus more precisely on the link between geographical and memorial excursions and on how physical errancy leads to memorial recovery. In the last part of my analysis, I shall analyse the way in which poetic deviations and errancy take part in the reconstruction of a lost memory.
The term ‘excursion’ first refers to a small trip or to the visit of a place. In this case, Marshall’s novel opens on an excursion as Avey Johnson is on a cruise in the Caribbean that she is about to leave. She is therefore about to go on an *excursion* from the cruise excursion – that is to say she is about to deviate from the planned course of the cruise. In the very first pages of the novel, the memories of the main character start to emerge. Avey remembers how the cruise was denounced by her daughter as superficial, banal and as a white people activity: “Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway, I keep asking you ?” [*Praisesong*, 13]. The vanity of Avey’s project stands in sharp contrast to the values evoked by her daughter’s necklace: “the noisy necklace of cowrie shells and amber she had brought back from Togo her last visit had sounded her angry despair with its rattle each time she breathed” [*Ibid.*]. The sound of the cowrie shells is a reminder of Avey’s African origins and of her connection with the history of slavery. Her daughter’s claim of this legacy as well as her political involvement of her daughter stand in sharp contrast with Avey’s decision to go on a cruise associated with power and racism. Material display and appearance are indeed at the core of the cruise (for that reason she travels with six suitcases full of clothes). Moreover, the name of the boat, *Bianca Pride*, ironically evokes white supremacist doctrines, while Avey Johnson herself is black. From the very beginning of the book, the alienation of the main character is made visible as she follows a course that is not her own and is led to observe the Caribbean islands and its inhabitants as an outsider, through the eyes of a white tourist or even as a colonizer: the members of the cruise have dinner in the Versailles Room, pompously decorated with tapestries and chandeliers. Again, Avey remembers her politically involved daughter who reminded her of the link between the French monarchy and colonisation: “Do you know how many treaties were signed there, in that infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the world ?” [*Praisesong*, 47].

Avey’s alienation results from a cultural hierarchisation and exclusivity linked to the idea that one has to adhere to a fixed and exclusive set of values to belong to a nation. Living in a society implies of course the identification to a set of values, but here, Avey is constrained to erase a part of her memory that is linked to her African-American culture and history, in order to comply to a WASP conception of the American nation:

Racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination [Gilroy, 1].

Gilroy underlines how racism structures the exclusive identities of the Western nations and therefore how violent the identification with racist values can be for someone with black skin. This is connected to the cultural hierarchy pertaining to the colonial ideology, as analysed by Frantz Fanon: “La doctrine de la hiérarchie culturelle n’est donc qu’une modalité de la hiérarchisation systématisée poursuivie de façon implacable ”[*Fanon, Pour La Révolution Africaine*, 43]. This hierarchy, for Fanon, is connected to racism and to the destruction of cultural differences:

Les nègres, du jour au lendemain, ont eu deux systèmes de référence par rapport auxquels il leur a fallu se situer. Leur métaphysique, ou moins prétentieusement leurs coutumes et les instances auxquelles elles renvoyaient, étaient abolies parce
qu’elles se trouvaient en contradiction avec une civilisation qu’ils ignoraient et qui leur en imposait [Fanon, Peau Noire, 89].

15 Such analyses provide a framework in which we can understand Avey’s alienation as linked to racism and to the legacies of colonialism and slavery. In this system of values, in which Western colonial cultures stand as superior to other cultures, Avey is indeed compelled to disregard African cultural legacies because they are considered incompatible with American values. She has to limit herself to an identity that rejects her culture and history. The violence and alienation that results from this process had led Avey and her husband to think of African American as others, on the margins and abnormal. In the United States, this system of values and cultural hierarchy is to be found in the WASP ideological model for American identity. Therefore, in order to feel she belongs to the American nation, Avey, as an African-American woman, has to drop her African cultural heritage and mimic the white, colonial, materialist way of life.

16 This process can be observed in Marshall’s novel through Avey’s way of life, her clothing, the place where she lives, her holidays etc. She lives in White Plains, a posh white neighbourhood, dresses according to the American upper-class dress code wearing silk and gloves [Praisesong, 45] and goes on a cruise in the Caribbean with “a bunch of white people” [Ibid., 13] during her holidays. Avey’s imitation of the white American middle-class progressively appears to be ridiculous and incongruous as she feels increasing embarrassment on the cruise. The text underlines with exhaustive details the attributes of white Western domination on the cruise: The Versailles Room, “with its Louis XIV décor and wealth of silver and crystal on the damask cover” [Ibid., 46], the haughtiness of the passengers, “the men in dinner jackets, the women in gowns” [Ibid.], the extreme sophistication of the desserts and if the food served on board contribute to the mocking of the materiality and vanity of the American upper class. Moreover, the vision of the Caribbean islands from the cruise is also caricatural: Tomasina Moore, Avey’s disdainful friend, pictures the islands as backward and provincial: “some of these little islands don’t see a plane going anywhere but maybe two, three times a week. She might be stuck for days. And in some place that won’t have a decent hotel to its name. She’ll wind up having to stay in some dump where the mosquitoes’ll eat her alive and the food [...] won’t be fit for dogs” [Praisesong, 25]. Her reaction when she learns that Avey is leaving the cruise is full of disdain for the Caribbean. She does not know the names of the islands (“some of these little islands”, “Cartarena or Cartarana or whatever they called it” [Ibid.]) and only assumes they won’t have touristic infrastructures good enough for rich Americans. The materialism, the ignorance and the racism of the dominating class are displayed and underlined at the beginning of the novel, thus conveying the rejection of Avey’s ancestry by the dominant values to which she has adhered. A part of herself has to be denied so she can be accepted among the members of the cruise. “She hadn’t been feeling herself” [Ibid., 20]. Here, Avey’s feeling of sickness on board of the Bianca Pride appears to be strongly linked to her cultural alienation.

17 While she is on the cruise and after her dream about her great Aunt Cuney, her physical discomfort grows irressibly, and her body reacts unexpectedly when she finds herself in the Versailles room: “it felt like a huge tumor had suddenly ballooned up at her center” [Praisesong, 52]. In addition, when she is willing to taste her dessert, her hand is suddenly paralysed. The effect of incongruity is stressed by the great amount of details given as to the fineness and appetizing aspect of the Peach Parfait: “it had been done to perfection in keeping with its name, with layers of sliced and sweetened
peaches alternated with syrup, whipped cream and peach sherbet up the length of the tall fluted glass” [Praisesong, 49]. As soon as she enters the Versailles room that night, she feels a change in her corporeal envelope. As it happened to her several times before, she cannot recognize herself in the mirror: “One morning she even accosted Avey Johnson in her bathroom mirror as she raised up from washing her face” [Ibid.]. The inability to recognize herself is the manifestation of a discord between the identity she assumes on the cruise and her forgotten cultural background. Her body disconnects even more strongly from her mind as her identity is shifting from the American upper-class mask she had been displaying and starts drifting and erring.

After erring on the decks of the cruise to try to calm her physical discomfort, her “restless steps” [Praisesong, 58] lead her to decide to go back “home” to New York and therefore to leave the cruise without being able to explain to anyone the reason of her sudden departure. She plans to go back to the White plains and she thus seeks to cure her disease in “another haven of whiteness” [Christian, 76], whereas this environment seems to be the very cause of her physical unease.

The strangeness of her own image in the mirror is also the expression of the discord in Avey’s being between body and mind. “Her mind in a way wasn’t even in her body, or for that matter, in the room” [Praisesong, 10], “Part of her had already stepped on board the launch and was planning swiftly over the morning sea toward the island and the waiting plane” [Ibid. 19]. To Barbara Christian, the disconnection between body and mind is the main stylistic feature in Marshall’s novel: “Marshall establishes the pervasive technique of the novel: the juxtaposition of supposed dream and supposed reality, splitting Avey’s being so that her mind may be in one place while her body is in another” [Christian, 76]. It allows the protagonist to connect past and present, reality and memory as well as a multiplicity of cultural influences. “Because her body is cut off from normal routine, Avey’s mind is free to roam through time and space.” [Ibid., 77].

From then on, Avey’s physical trajectory is deviated: while leaving the predicted course of the cruise, she is diverted from her way back home as she misses her flight, stays on the island of Granada for a night and is finally led to Carriacou for the annual excursion. Even as she is waiting for a taxi on the wharf, just after leaving the cruise, she feels drawn in the same direction as the people going towards the small boats for the excursion: “the absurd thought came to her: to take her along with them” [Praisesong, 70]. Then the thought becomes a fact as “a hand on her elbow was actually steering her out in the crowd” [Praisesong, 72] and she is almost carried away from her course to New York by the crowd: “they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going” [Praisesong, 72]. This time resisting the movement towards Carriacou – which announces her next excursion with Lebert Joseph on the island– she manages to take a taxi to a hotel where she would wait for her flight on the next day. However, her physical discomfort and sickness continue while she is staying at the luxurious hotel where the taxi drove her. The hotel terribly reminds her of the Bianca Pride: it is “another haven of whiteness” [op. cit.] for rich tourists. “She felt as if she were back on the Bianca Pride’s upper decks [...] and suddenly there it was again: the mysterious welling up in her stomach and under her heart” [Praisesong, 82]. As the novel goes on, the reader understands how Avey’s disease is linked to the drifting of her mind away from the physical location of her body. Avey is haunted by other times and places that participate in the modification of her identity. The conflict between what she is in appearance – a rich upper-class American – and the actual complexity of her identity –
she is also the descendent of African slaves – is represented in the struggle between herself and Aunt Cuney in the dream: the elegant, materialist and haughty American Avey is fighting with her Aunt Cuney, devoted to the memory of slavery and of Africa, and who wants to remember her origins.

21 This internal conflict and the errancy of her mind in times and places makes Avey lose the awareness of her position in space: Avey wanders on the beach before taking her flight. “Awkward” [Praisesong, 152] and “absent” [Praisesong, 153], she hardly seems to be aware of the direction she is taking and that she is drawn away from the hotels and resorts. “On setting out she had turned without being conscious of it towards that section of the beach where there were no hotels as yet” [Praisesong, 153]. Taking the risk of missing her plane, she leaves the hotel with no hat and no watch, no money and no passport. She has dropped her mask and her elegant dress code as she is now deprived of the pompous clothes she had in her dream. “Avey Johnson drifted aimlessly along, indifferent to her surrounding unaware of the distance she was covering, simply moving through the soundless air and the transcendent morning light” [Praisesong, 154]. Her body course is aimless while her mind is wandering in memories of her past. As the hotels disappear behind her, she feels better and relieved. She is finally able to look around her. Away from the social constraints of the cruise ship and from her familiar environment, Avey sheds her mask and her alienated identity: she is now free to let her mind wander just like her body. Once again, body and mind interact with one another and geographical excursions impact on corporeality.

22 The exposure to the sun after walking for a long time makes her sick and she ends up in a rum shop to find some water. In the rum shop, Lebert Joseph gives a corporeal performance of memory: he shows that through dances and songs, memory can be kept in the body. Avey is once more drawn away from her expected direction – this time to the airport. When she wants to decline Lebert Joseph’s invitation to join him on an excursion to Carriacou, she feels again the swell in her stomach. She is almost physically forced to accept, passively drawn out of the fixed state of things: “At two o’clock that afternoon, the hour Avey Johnson had been scheduled to leave for the airport, she found herself back down on the wharf instead [...] She wasn’t altogether sure how she had gotten there, everything had moved so swiftly once she had given in” [Praisesong, 185]. This passage illustrates Avey’s uncertain trajectory: she is not “sure” how she arrived on the wharf and she finds herself there, still not conscious of her environment, as if absorbed completely by the quest her mind is undertaking towards memorial recovery. She evolves hazardously and lets herself be guided by the people she encounters. In this passage, Avey’s physical wandering appears linked to a liberation from her mental alienation.

23 While on her way to Carriacou, Avey’s body is this time reacting violently: she falls asleep on the boat and wakes up to purge herself – vomiting and defecating: “her entire insides erupted” [Praisesong, 204], “[the contractions] had reached below her stomach to the place where up to this morning in the rum shop shed felt the strange oppressive fullness” [Praisesong, 207]. The swelling of her stomach is finally relieved. On the cruise and when she was about to decline Lebert Joseph’s invitation to the excursion, she had the sensation of having something “alien” inside her that “needed to be expelled” [Praisesong, 207]. The journey on the boat to Carriacou is the culmination of her physical discomfort. Her unease and her alienation are expelled. While she is approaching the island of Carriacou, a place of memorial recovery, she is
finally liberated from something that was eating her up. While vomiting on the boat, Avey is accompanied by Carriacou women who help her and who encourage her purge. Once on the island, she feels “a yawning hole where her life had once been” [Praisesong, 214]. She feels like “a baby that had soiled itself” [Praisesong, 217] when she is bathed by two women. The physical purge that has taken place on the boat appears as a positive experience, a step towards rebirth and a liberation from the alienating mimicry of the white American upper class:

Purged and baptized, Avey is reborn as a member of the annual excursion to this homeland. The cleansing finds Avey shedding of the proper, suit-wearing, middle class self who sacrificed her marriage to a capitalist American dream, and allow Avey to return to her younger, more comfortable self on Tatem, with Aunt Cuney. [Thorsson, 648].

Thorsson indeed sees Avey’s purge as a rebirth and a liberation from the manacles of WASP exclusive identity. Avey’s purge leads to self-reconstruction and memorial recovery. Born again, she can finally recover the memory of her past that is anchored deeply in her body. This corporeal manifestation can be seen as the physical expulsion of an artificial identity as well as the surfacing of another part of her identity hidden deep inside her that she cannot contain anymore.

Cultural alienation is thus physically expressed in Marshall’s novel through physical sickness. On excursion and through encounters and relations, cultural alienation is relieved, and memories can emerge. Physical errancy appears as a condition for the mind to wander freely in the depth of memory.

**From geographical to memorial excursion**

The inscription in Avey’s body of traces of her origins is clearly visible when Avey feels drawn into the dancing circle in Carriacou. She then realizes that she knows the steps of the dance, deeply inscribed inside herself: “She had slipped without being conscious of it into a step that was something more than just walking. Her feet of their own accord began to glide forward” [Praisesong, 248]. This passage stresses the spontaneity of Avey’s movements: the surging of memories through body rituals underlines the irrepressible presence of traces of the past. Avey remembers the steps from the Ring Shout dance in Tatem which she observed and pantomimed when she was a child. She “becomes aware of her body as a repository of memory” [Rogers, 77]. Rogers has explored “Marshall’s construction of a fictional body as a site of cultural expression and memory” [Ibid., 78] and shown how “the body functions in the text not only as an indicator of personal consciousness, but also as a metaphor for African people’s cultural disinheritance created by the African diaspora” [Ibid.]. The complexity of Avey’s multifaceted identity appears during the dance. Then, her shy steps progressively gain confidence: “All of her moving suddenly with a vigor and passion she hadn’t felt in years” [Praisesong, 249]. Not only does Avey remember the steps but she also finds some pleasure, satisfaction and a sense of self-fulfilment in the dancing ritual showing the emancipatory dimension of the memorial ritual.

Decades later, the steps surface again, connecting Avey physically with her people: “And for the first time since when she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads (like the kind used in embroidery) which were thin to the point of invisibility yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island” [Praisesong,
249]. The memory of the connection with the other African Americans from her neighbourhood in New York, all going on an excursion to Bear Mountain Park, returns through the feeling of being linked to her community by small threads “streaming out of everyone there to enter her, making her part of what seemed a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity” [Praisesong, 249]. In her childhood, Avey had a sense of belonging to the African diaspora, as her Aunt Cuney reminded her of her Ibo ancestry. This awareness had disappeared with the will to climb up the social scale and to fit in the American upper class. The loss of the sense of belonging to the African diaspora is expressed though Avey not feeling concerned by the Civil Rights movement for instance. The dance in Carriacou renews the awareness of her links and makes the threads that bond her to the other members of the African diaspora visible. By performing a memorial ritual on Carriacou island, Avey is able to recover the memory of her ancestors and to weave connections with others.

28 As her body moves further and further away from its expected course, clues of her past become more prominent. Geographical errancy creates relations and connections, thus echoing Glissant’s notion of errancy which promotes uprooting and the emergence of rhizomic identities. While she is physically erring, Avey encounters many different persons, bringing memory back to mind. For instance, hearing the people on the wharf waiting to go on the excursion speaking Patois, she remembers the sounds of the language spoken in Tatem. “She had heard it [...] and it had fleetingly called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words [Praisesong, 67]. The patois spoken by the people is at the same time “unintelligible” [Praisesong, 67] and familiar. The traces of memories combined with the relations woven on excursion allow her to rebuild a lost past: “Sometimes the least thing seen or heard during the day, or merely thought of in passing, could trigger a dream of people or events long-forgotten [...] The vaguely familiar sound of the Patois might have resurrected Tatem and the old woman” [Praisesong, 67].

29 Slowly her awareness of the diaspora is rising. While she felt at odds with the people on the cruise, she feels part of the population on the wharf: “From the way they were acting she could simply have been one of them there on the wharf” [Praisesong, 69]. She is even mistaken for someone else and she is told she could be her twin, highlighting her common physical features with the people from Grenada and Carriacou. She is American and claims it, as she does when Lebert Joseph asks her what her “nation” is [Ibid., 167] in the rum shop. She is therefore surprised that she can be mistaken with someone from the islands because she considers herself to be so different from them. The passage on the wharf highlights the transnational bonds between the descendants of the African slaves. She becomes slowly aware that they all belong to the African diaspora and that her American identity and nationality are reconcilable with a broader sense of belonging. Interestingly, this awareness first emerges as she feels physically integrated into the crowd on the wharf. Again, her links with the African diaspora are made visible through corporeal experience.

30 Traces from her past emerge progressively in the course of the novel. From her daughter’s wearing a cowrie necklace to the struggle for Civil Rights, the African diaspora slowly emerges as a space of belonging. Small pieces of information about the African cultural legacies in the United States are released: jazz music that Avey and her husband Jay used to listen to or the poems by some of the authors of the Harlem
Renaissance such as Langston Hughes for instance. The continuation of the racial system of domination is also briefly sketched as Avey remembers the bombing of her church by the Ku Klux Klan when she was a child (in 1963) in Birmingham, Alabama. Without saying much, this childhood memory conjures up racism and segregation in the United States, especially in the Southern states. Her memory bears no direct mention of racial hatred nor of the KKK, only the horror and the violence of the bombing. Later in the novel, racial violence is more graphically depicted when she remembers having seen from her window a black man clubbed by policemen. Standing out of the rest of the text, the memory in italics surfaces unexpectedly, as a repressed memory: “Where had that night surfaced from?” [Praisesong, 56], “her memory seemed to be playing [...] frightening tricks” [Praisesong, 57]. This image of racial violence is actually recalled by the feeling of unease she experienced on the cruise ship. The sort of violence perpetrated towards her is not physical – even if it is physically expressed through her sickness – but cultural: she pretended to belong to a world that in fact rejects and condemns what she is.

More memories come to the surface and, as she goes further on excursion, some acts and rituals of remembrance spring up in her mind: The Ring Shout, a religious ritual coming from the African slaves in the West Indies and in the United States, is an instance of creolised religious practises in the Americas since it is an African ritual performed in a Christian church. The impact of this ritual on Avey’s identity construction thus highlights the multifaceted nature of her identity. She also remembers in great details her ritual walk to the Ibo Landing with Aunt Cuney or the annual excursions to the Bear Mountain State Park with her family from Coney Island. The sight of ruined fields of a former plantation in Carriacou reminds her of the cotton plantations on Tatem Island. The fields, like Avey’s memories, bear the traces of slavery and of African origins, expressing a parallel between physical geography and mental geography.

As Avey’s memories of the past emerge throughout her encounters on excursion, she becomes growingly obsessed with her origins. She is haunted by the question Lebert Joseph asked her on their first encounter: “What’s your nation?” [Praisesong, 167]. He tries to guess and suggests several names: Yarraba, Moko, Banda, Cromanti, etc. Avey is astonished by the question and she understands what he means, recalling the image of her daughter’s cowrie necklace: “What was the man going on about? [...] She thought she heard the faint rattle of the necklace of cowrie shells and amber Marion always wore. Africa? Did they have something to do with Africa?” [Ibid.]. She answers that she is an American tourist from New York, not understanding that Lebert Joseph is talking about her African origins. This passage highlights Avey’s oblivion because it does not occur to her that she could belong to more than one place. She only claims her sense of belonging to the United States while the buried African origins are long forgotten. Yet, getting further on excursion and on the island of Carriacou, she observes the ritual nation dances and Joseph’s question is raised again twice: “What nation you is?” [Praisesong, 238] (the second time the question is emphasized by italics). The question of the origins becomes an obsession and is finally answered when her body remembers the steps of the Ring Shout and when she joins her people from the African diaspora in the dance circle. Lebert Joseph finds her “nation” just watching her dancing: “I watched you good last night at the fete and I can’t say for sure but I feels you is an Arada, oui. Something about the way you was doing the Carriacou Tramp there towards the end put me in mind of people from that nation” [Praisesong, 252].
While Avey was unable to think about her African origins before going to Carriacou, her errancy in the Caribbean leads her to a corporeal experience of memorial recovery. Physical performances of rituals keep memories of the past anchored in the bodies.

Yet, watching the nation dances Avey feels deeply moved, not by the dance, but by the simple act of remembering:

> 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 not even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burnt-out end. And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved and longed in for herself” [Praisesong, 240].

The direct lineages from precise African tribes are depicted as cultural creations. But what matters is not the veracity of historical details. The rituals appear as a means to remember one’s origins and one’s cultural legacy and richness, and therefore undermine monolithic identities, create a sense of belonging to several places at the same time as well as a possibility for creolization, for multiple roots. The myth of the direct lineage from a precise ethnic group is of course an illusion because intermixing between African slaves occurred even in the slave ships. Yet this myth is part of the construction of identity and gives a sense of belonging to a large and transnational community.

The remembrance of the origins and the celebration of a long uninterrupted lineage, even if it is mythical, is an act of empowerment, the expression of the strength of cultural remembrance and of the resistance to Western cultural domination. “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” [Praisesong, 232]. Avey is finally able to reconcile her multiple cultural influences and to develop a sense of belonging to several places at the same time. She is finally overcoming what Dubois calls “double consciousness”, the alienation she endured on the cruise and before in the United States as she was forced to reject her ancestry. It is this process construction of new cultures from the people’s memories of Africa which Glissant, in his reflexions on the notion of trace, has analysed:

> Si ce Néo-Américain ne chante pas des chansons africaines d’il y a deux ou trois siècles, il réinstaure dans la Caraïbe, au Brésil et en Amérique du Nord, par pensée de la trace, des formes d’art qu’il propose comme valables pour tous [Glissant, Introduction à une poétique du divers, 17].

What is important is the act of remembering, of not forgetting those who suffered and whose voices “sounded like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs” [Praisesong, 244]. The act of remembrance and the emotions conveyed become more important than the official historical truths and knowledge:

> The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host for subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. [Praisesong, 244-5]

The rituals of remembrance in Carriacou makes the passing on of historical memories possible through a discourse from the margins that articulates historical memories linked with feelings and emotions rather than with the facts of hegemonic historical discourses. This corporeal anamnesis refutes dominant discourses and allows lost
memories to come to the surface. Ritual dances are thus depicted as “the shuffle designed to stay the course of history” [*Praisesong*, 250].

Physical distance from the planned course of Avey’s journey brings memorial recovery. In this process, Carriacou stands as a space for memory and remembrance, as a place “designed to stay the course of history” [op. cit.]. Avey reaches the island of Carriacou by boat. For Gilroy, the image of the ship inevitably recalls the middle passage:

Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records and choirs [Gilroy, 4].

The journey to Carriacou – like the journey to Bear Mountain Park, which is explicitly compared to a return to Africa – can thus be seen as an imaginary journey to African origins. The continuities between Carriacou and Africa are striking: its inhabitants still speak patois, a mix between African languages and European languages, the rituals and dances are inherited from African cultures and it is the place of the annual excursion, entirely devoted to the remembrance of “the Long-Time People” [*Praisesong*, 165].

At the end of the novel, when Avey is flying over the island, it hardly appears as a real place, but rather as an imaginary space of memorial recovery: “Everything fleeting and ephemeral. The island more a mirage rather than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need” [*Praisesong*, 254]. In Carriacou, encounters help create relations and provoke the surfacing of buried origins. On excursion and confronted to alterity, identities are constantly changing, constantly creolizing.

Avey, like her aunt before her, becomes aware of her role of memorial guardian and transmitter of her origins. At the end of the novel, Avey imagines herself living in her Aunt Cuney’s house and passing the story of the Ibo Landing on to her grandchildren. Keith Standiford sees Cuney as a powerful agent of memorial transmission and reconstruction:

>[She is] a griot and mentor to her great-niece, and priestess to the small community in exile at Tatem. She assumed responsibility for preserving the cyclic continuum in much the same way that the traditional elders and priests of the tribes functioned in her ancestral home [...] Embellishing it each time she recounted it, she inspired Avey’s youthful imagination with the sheer magic of the myth, reenacting its associative drama by her long ritual trek to the original site of its occurrence, initiating her young great-niece into its rites and ceremonies, its duties and obligations. Thus, she signified her identification with the Ibos’ acts and time, thereby becoming the author of her own history, the sole possessor and disposer of her own time, the high priestess of her own cult [Standiford, 374].

Storytelling is therefore at the same time a ritual of remembrance and an act of empowerment for Aunt Cuney, then for Avey since it allows them to resist the imposed identity of the dominant culture and to claim a creolized identity connected to their African origins. Avey’s overwhelming feeling of power at the very end of the book is conveyed through the lexical field of authority (“forced”, “tyrannical”, “lead”, “ordain” [*Praisesong*, 256]). Authority as the power to command is thus intrinsically linked to authority as literary creation and storytelling. Corporeal and memorial excursions are intimately connected to a literary excursion into the story of the Ibo Landing. This leads me to consider how Marshall’s text participates in the process of memorial recovery through poetics of excursion.
The search for memorial reconstruction in Marshall’s novel is closely linked to storytelling as Avey’s quest is rooted in her Aunt’s story of the Ibo Landing. The unceasing excursion that takes place is reflected in the wandering quality of the text. First of all, the whole plot seems to be defined by the unexpected. The events of the novel are never those that are anticipated by the main character: Avey thinks she will find a taxi on her arrival to Grenada and that she will take a plane back to New York. Yet, when she lands on Grenada island she cannot find what she is used to find when she visits an island, like ragtag boys, taxis, souvenir vendors... “Where for that matter – she gave another puzzled look around – were all the other types she was used to seeing on the wharves in other places she had been [...] None of them were in sight” [Praisesong, 65]. Instead she finds a crowd of elegantly dressed people, men, women and children. The plot of the novel, like its main character, is in errancy: it is unstable and misleads the reader out of the expected course of events.

Two prolepses in italics on pages 23 and 26 pertain to the misleading nature of the plot. She imagines what will happen after she leaves the cruise: “There would be a taxi waiting for her on the wharf of the little pastel town. Or one would arrive the moment she stepped off the launch” [Praisesong, 23]. The repetition of the modal “would” in the first prolepsis still makes the passage appear to be hypothetical. Yet, the second prolepsis is written in the past tense: “The drive from Kennedy airport to their small section of North White Plains was over. The airport limousine had deposited her at the door and departed. Before leaving, the driver had helped her take the suitcases into the front hall.” [Praisesong, 26]. In this passage, the presence of many details added to the past tense convey a sense of realization of the events. The final prolepsis, on her way back to the United States, about her project to continue the mission of her Aunt Cuney and to pass the story of the Ibos on to her grandchildren, is not even in italics and is completely integrated into the text: its plausibility is therefore even less questionable. Again, the reader is misled as to the end of the plot, which is just another textual excursion, a deviation from the course of events. The plotline is not straight as other potential plotlines are inserted, parallel to the first but hypothetical. Prolepses are misleading and deviating the plot.

Numerous other tropes undermine the straight line of the plot, such as the repetitions of words and expressions – “Too much” is repeated eleven times between page 138 and page 142, and the sentence “Do you know who you sound like?” is repeated several times [Praisesong, 106, 132] – or the repetition motifs or events – the same memory of her husband’s words about black people not working enough is evoked three times: “If it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That’s the only way these Negroes out here’ll begin making any progress” [Praisesong, 132, 135, 140]. Some memories, words, questions haunting the text and the character, come back regularly, interrupting the plot. Moreover, these repetitions are connected to the streams of consciousness permeating the narration as the narrative voice shifts to Avey’s thoughts and preoccupations: “She looked around her in alarm. The hotel? It too had vanished. How far had she come? What time was it? Her flight that afternoon? Where was some shade?” [Praisesong, 156]. The passage is marked by the sudden shift from an external narration to the series of questions and doubts going through Avey’s mind. The succession of questions, some of them without a verb, shows no transition, usher the reader into the character’s mind. The text is a constant back
and forth movement between the narrative voice and Avey’s thoughts, contributing to
the non-linear character of the novel. Streams of consciousness add to the erring
quality of the text. At some point, the plot is even marked by a sense of circularity
when it almost folds back on itself: the plot is indeed told again by Avey to Lebert
Joseph, as she explains how she left the cruise because she felt sick, how she got lost
on the beach, her dream about her Aunt Cuney, etc. [Praisesong, 169-171]. The story is
told again within the story, folding the plot over itself and moving away from its course.

Textual excursions are expressed through prolepses, but also through analepses. The
first analepsis is Avey’s memory of the music she used to listen to with her dead
husband. Her experience of leaving the course of the cruise calls to her mind her past
and especially parts of her past that are linked with African origins. Analepses in the
novel are departures from the main plot: they disrupt its linear course and ceaselessly
recall the past into the present. The text is permeated by phrases that call for
analepses: “when was the last time…” [Praisesong, 11, 143] or “She found herself
thinking suddenly of[…]” [Praisesong, 138]. The text is constantly interrupted by sudden
surges of memories emerging one after another. Four chapters in the second part are
devoted to her past life with her husband, Jay. This move away from the plot explores
the progressive alienation of Avey and her husband from the cultural legacies of Africa
in the United States. They both changed a creolized identity for a constructed and fixed
white middle-class American identity. These four chapters emphasize Avey and Jay’s
early commitment to jazz music and Harlem Renaissance poets, their former awareness
of belonging to an African diaspora through their references to Gulla and Dahomey or
through their annual visits to Tatem. The yearning for material comfort leads Avey and
Jay to cultural compliance, mimicry, and to the burial of African-American culture:
their disdain for other black people for not having achieved the same social rise shows
the level of their alienation. Avey’s corporeal, geographical and memorial excursions
are connected to textual excursions into her past through successive analepses.

The text wanders from one memory to another (one memory calls for another) and
connects them, translating Avey’s stream of consciousness. On page 33 for instance,
Avey’s stream of consciousness leads us from the memory of the bombing of a Baptist
church in Birmingham, to the clubbing of a black man by the police and to the memory
of the ritual walk with her aunt Cuney to the Ibo Landing. The text is “[swinging] like a
pendulum” [Praisesong, 232] because it links one place to another and one time frame to
another, and as such is a reflection of Avey’s mind. Analepses in Marshall’s novel are
textual ex-cursions – they move away from the plotline – and bring about memorial incursions, violent and unexpected entrances into the past through analepses. The text
reflects the process of remembering since it operates not only excursions – bringing back memories through the confrontation to alterity and through encounters – but also
incursions – bringing memories back to the surface by exploring one’s buried past.

Prolepses and analepses in the text mirror the geographical errancy of the character.
Errancy creates a parallel between the succession of Avey’s adventures and the
structure of the text. It allows the connection between seemingly disconnected
cultures, peoples, times and places. Marshall’s novel, through the constant shifts in
time that pervade its text, can be understood as a rhizomic novel because its poetics of
errancy creates a connection between heterogeneous elements of different times and
origins.
Marshall’s novel is itself a textual excursion away from the official historical discourse: it constitutes a departure from the desire for objectivity and veracity of historical writings and focuses rather on the process of memorial recovery. Collective memory appears more important than official historical knowledge and the struggle for memorial reconstruction opposes the dominant and univocal historical discourse, as it is suggested by Paul Ricoeur: “le devoir de mémoire est aujourd’hui volontiers convoqué dans le dessein de court-circuiter le travail critique de l’histoire” [Ricoeur, 736]. Memorial recollection of the past offers a counter-discourse and gives a voice to the descendants of the African diaspora in a society marked by cultural hierarchy and racism. Avey’s painful oblivion at the beginning of the text highlights the necessity of memorial recovery and more specifically of the expression of a subaltern collective memory. The novel’s stress on the voicing of subaltern collective memory echoes Aggée Lomo’s idea that memory has been confiscated from dominated peoples:

la nécessité de la restauration d’une conscience historique et d’un passé marqué par la confiscation de la mémoire et de la prise en otage des peuples dominés, et de l’autre l’impérieuse nécessité de ne pas trahir l’objectif de « vérité historique » quel que soit celui qui porte le discours [Lomo, 169].

Marshall’s novel, through its poetics of excursion and errancy, explores the reconnection between the Caribbean, the United States and Africa through memorial recollection of diasporic cultural heritage and therefore pertains to what Brathwaite calls the “literature of reconnection” which weaves memorial recollection and diasporic cultural heritage. Moreover, the excursive tropes characterizing Marshall’s text indirectly underline the power relations that exist between different cultural heritages: they indeed reaffirm collective and oral memory over the dominant historical discourse and over the WASP cultural supremacy. Subverting literary norms through poetics of excursion, Marshall’s text is highly political as it expresses a collective resistance to cultural domination and exclusion as well as the quest for the memorial reconstruction of African cultural legacies.

Conclusion

Praisesong for the Widow inscribes the issues of memory and cultural identity in poetics of excursion and errancy. This article has shown that excursion and errancy are central motifs and tropes, which inform the representation of the process of memorial recovery in the novel. Praisesong for the Widow is constantly interrupted and deviated from its story line through the character’s unceasing excursions and through the text’s excursive tropes. Yet, it also stages the sinuous memorial reconstruction of the main character’s African origins and the collective acts of remembrance of the African diaspora throughout the Americas, from the Unites States to the Caribbean. The novel explores the slow and painful process of memorial recovery which is unavoidably linked to a rhizomic construction of identities through encounters. Alterity plays a main role in memorial reconstruction, in the resistance to dominant and exclusive cultures and in the acceptance of the creolization of identities. Marshall’s work underlines the importance played by errancy in the memorial process. In errancy, out of a set course, cultural exclusivism, stereotypes and fixed identities are indeed undermined so that memories of the past can emerge. It is in errancy and excursion
that the immersed part of one’s identity can come to the surface and bring to light the creolized nature of identities.

Moreover, Marshall’s novel opens a reflection on the different facets of memory and remembrance which actually appear as double-edged processes. On the one hand, forgotten or repressed memories can lead to cultural alienation and on the other hand, the unescapable aspect of memory and the obligation to remember can also lead to a form of alienation. Both aspects are ambivalently expressed through Avey’s feeling of disease and corporeal discomfort. Therefore, the end of the novel is again misleading, first because it is a hypothetic ending, but also because Avey’s fervent will to pass on the story of the Ibo Landing is tinged with authority and obsession.

The issue of remembering is central in Marshall’s works and plays an equally ambivalent role in others of her novels. Brown Girl, Brownstones, a novel on a Barbadian family living in Brooklyn, explores the difficulty of adaptation to a new country and to a new culture, and therefore the question of commitment to the culture of origin. In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, remembering is similarly equivocal as it can be a driving force of resistance against domination as well as a destructive haunting that leads to immobility and fixity. The risk of memorial haunting is a fixation of identity which seems however to be prevented by the orality of storytelling, bringing variation to the repetition.

More broadly, Praisesong for the Widow raises the questions of identity quest in the context of cultural power relations and of the role of literature in the subversion of cultural domination and in the decolonization of historical memories. Praisesong for the Widow conveys the difficulty of reclaiming an African cultural heritage in a country dominated by exclusive WASP cultural norms. Yet, memory – contrary to official historical facts – is not always reliable but is crucial in the identity building process. Marshall’s novel therefore highlights the role of collective and subaltern memory in identity building, and it particularly stresses the necessity of creating relations in the process of memorial recovery. Marshall’s writing can be seen as rhizomatic, creating link between different times and spaces. The real and imagined continuities between African and American cultures allow the construction of creolized identities that resist again exclusivism. In that sense, literature and storytelling stand in opposition to dominant history and participate in memorial reconstructions of the past and in the process of creolizing identities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Memorial Excursion and Errancy in Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow


NOTES

3. I call excursive tropes the literary devices that can be found in Marshall’s work and that reflect the sense of errancy of the character. These tropes – such as analepses, prolepses, or streams of consciousness – introduce detours and digressions in the main plot, which is therefore deviated from its course.

ABSTRACTS

Marshall’s novel inscribes memory and cultural identity in poetics of excursion and errancy. The protagonist deviates from the course planned of an American cruise ship and escapes an alienated and monolithic identity when the underlying memory of her African and Caribbean origins emerges on the island of Carriacou to which she is accidentally led. The spatial excursion
leads to a memorial excursion as Avey wanders in the depths of the cultural rituals brought through the Middle Passage from Africa. The excursion includes a rhetorical dimension: it takes part in the reconstruction of a lost memory while the numerous digressions and analepses deviate the plot line. I shall base my argument on Glissant’s poetics of errancy\(^1\) to show that the memorial process depends on the hazard of encounters and relations. Memorial recovery is connected to the confrontation to the unpredictability of the relations created on excursion.

Cet article montre comment le roman de Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*, s’inscrit dans une poétique de l’excursion et de l’errance. Le processus de recouvrement de la mémoire culturelle et identitaire y est présenté comme sinueux et inattendu. La protagoniste, Avey Johnson, quitte un bateau de croisière américain dans les Caraïbes pour se retrouver par accident sur l’île de Cariacou où se déroulent des rituels de commémoration des racines culturelles africaines de la Caraïbe. Cet article montre qu’en *ex-curision* (en déviant du parcours prévu par la croisière), le personnage quitte alors son statisme identitaire lorsque la mémoire sous-jacente de ses origines africaines et caribéennes resurgit. L’excursion spatiale s’accompagne d’une excursion mémorielle, tandis qu’Avey erre dans les tréfonds de la mémoire culturelle des esclaves venus d’Afrique. L’excursion est enfin textuelle: elle participe de la restauration d’une mémoire perdue tandis que les digressions et les analepses viennent dévier la trajectoire du récit. Je m’appuierai sur la poétique de l’errance glissantienne\(^2\) qui contrebalance une pensée fixiste de l’identité afin de montrer que le processus mémoriel est inattendu et ne suit pas de trajectoire précise. Je mettrai en évidence le recouvrement d’une mémoire culturelle comme étant indissociable de la rencontre avec l’Autre et de l’imprévisible des relations qui se tissent lors de l’excursion.

INDEX

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AUTHOR

PAULINE AMY DE LA BRETÊQUE

Sorbonne Université - VALE (EA 4085)