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Oral Traditions: An Analysis of Story Telling and Performance in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Dorothy Noyes, in her essay "Tradition: Three Traditions," notes that the word "tradition" implies "handing over" or "delivery" (Noyes 233). Furthermore, tradition is identified as a communal belonging that involves "the transfer of responsibility for a valued practice or performance" from one generation to the next (233). This essay will apply the characteristics and role of "tradition," outlined by Noyes and others, to develop a critical understanding of two acts of oral tradition pivotal to the spiritual transformation of Avey Johnson, the protagonist of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow. These two interconnected acts, the story of Ibo Landing and the ritual of Beg Pardon, are instances of oral memory that are shared and transmitted between peers and to future generations through story telling and performance. Among other purposes, 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. In the novel, Marshall also sounds a warning to her readers about the need for vigilance in protecting oral traditions in the face of materialism.

The story of Ibo Landing is first told to Avey Johnson by her great-aunt Cuney when she is a young child spending her summers in Tatem, South Carolina. This

story is a legend that great-aunt Cuney ritualistically narrates to Avey every summer. It tells of the enslaved Ibos landing at Tatem from the slave ships, sizing up the land and the white slave owners, and then simply turning around and starting a walk back across the water to their homeland. Roger Davis notes that the act of storytelling is an essential part of oral narratives and is an "effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related" (Davis 66). While Cuney does not tell a series of tales, her story is relevant to Avey because her great grandmother had witnessed the Ibos landing at Tatem, and she is a part of the African diasporic community. Avey is then ten years old and begins to think that "in instilling the story of the Ibos,... the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty bound to fulfill" (Marshall 42). However, she is unable to comprehend what this mission might be through most of her adult life. Although the story of Ibo Landing remains engraved upon her mind through adulthood, and she revisits Tatem Island several times, she fails to realize the implication of the story and actualize the solidarity that it promotes.

Great-aunt Cuney's repeated narration of the legend of Ibo Landing to Avey is her attempt to pass on an oral tradition from her generation to the next. This transmission preserves a tale that has

become a part of the history and culture of the black slaves who were transported to the United States. Davis concurs that “the experience of the oral narrative, of telling and listening to stories, has been a vital part of the development of the body of thought and tradition that has formed culture and united diverse peoples” (Davis 66). Thus, this story is also critical because of its importance to the African American identity. Elizabeth McNeil writes that the tale of Ibo Landing “is a folkloric resource exemplifying resistance to social factors that have denied self-and community actualization” (191). The Ibos upon landing at Tatem realize that if they stay in this new land, they will suffer untold physical and mental torments. They will be denied their identity and their freedoms, and their sense of community and culture will be torn apart by the exploitative practices of the slave owners. Their action of turning away from this dismal future and walking back home is an extraordinary act of courage and mutual trust in the face of social pressure and physical and mental violence. The seemingly insurmountable obstacle of the water that separates them from their home becomes a positive and productive environment where they can reaffirm their community bonds as they embark on a journey home. Later in her life, Avey will recognize the ability of this story to connect her to the experiences of her ancestors and the relevance of her great-aunt’s storytelling.

Before this understanding comes about, Avey must undergo a spiritual and physical journey late in her life. During this spiritual journey, Avey is first transported from New York to Grenada, and finally to Carriacou. In Carriacou, she encounters the second oral tradition in this novel: the ceremony of Beg Pardon. It is this ceremony that leads her back to the story of Ibo Landing in a dramatic rediscovery of her

own personal and cultural identity. As Joseph Lebert, Avey’s spiritual guide, explains, the Beg Pardon ceremony involves three parts: first, begging the “Old Parents” or the ancestors for forgiveness for any wrongs done to them by the individual; second, the Nation dances, when individuals who claim descent from different African nations dance their unique dances; and third, the Creole dances, for those individuals who no longer know from which nation they descended. The Beg Pardon ritual represents an act of remembrance of ancestors and culture coded in oral memory. The Carriacou people remember their ancestors through narration and performance. This ceremony enables them to renew their connection to their heritage every year.

Joseph Lebert warns Avey that this ceremony is necessary because forgetting one’s heritage can have bad consequences for the individual. He tells Avey, “I tell you, you best remember them [the Old Parents]!... if not, they get vex and cause you trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute” (Marshall 165). Avey, herself, has found her life upended during the cruise. She has come to a jarring awakening in Grenada that she and Jay, her (now dead) husband, lost their passion for life and their connection to their heritage and history during their quest to succeed in life. They became consumed by their desire for material success, and bartered away their “rituals and pleasures, the playfulness and wit,” music, respect for their unique identity, and sense of belonging to the black community and the African diaspora (Marshall 139). True to Lebert’s warning, this forced distance from her heritage turns Avey’s life around when she finally realizes in Grenada that she and Jay had lost a valuable part of themselves. When they lost their passion for life, they turned into shells of their former selves. With great despair,

Avey senses “a yawning hole down which her life of the past thirty years had vanished” (172).

According to McNeil, it is during this period too that Avey and Jay “stopped treasuring Cuney’s Gullah tale of Ibo Landing... in a denial of self and community that lasted through the remaining decades of their marriage (McNeil 190). Avey does not recognize the significance of the story of Ibo Landing because she and Jay sever themselves from their ancestors and their heritage to pursue material prosperity. In the same breath, Avey also severs herself from the responsibility of transmitting this oral tradition to future generations. Thus, this “loss of loving ritual [also] represents a separation from a lineage that depends on the memories and stories of subsequent generations” (Olmstead). Avey’s sense of loss is now compounded by the fact that she has failed to share and transmit her heritage in the way great-aunt Cuney tried to.

It is the presence of this sense of loss that propels her to go on the Carriacou Expedition. She realizes that the Beg Pardon ceremony, another form of an oral and cultural memory, offers a way to rediscover her cultural heritage and remake her identity. This rediscovery, Turner Smith writes, is facilitated through re-memory, which “functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize [memories] into a meaningful sequential whole...As one re-memories an event, one almost re-experiences it at the same time that one is constructing a narrative of it” (722). This process of remembering begins with her boat journey to Carriacou where she is purged of her body’s waste. This waste represents the dead weight of material values and her devalued identity, and the boat journey itself allows her to (re)experience the Middle Passage

that the slaves underwent. Thus, when she arrives at the Beg Pardon, her body has been refreshed and it has been physically prepared, ready to renew her connection to her ancestors.

At the ceremony, she finally participates in the Carriacou Tram, reminiscent of the ring-shout she witnessed on Tatem Island. In a climactic moment, Avey feels an intrinsic and comforting sense of belonging to the other dancers around her. Marshall writes that Avey

“felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored thread...which were thin to the point of invisibility yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island... she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her..and their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming” (249).

This ceremony is tied to the process of rememory because it allows her to experience the community that the enslaved Africans felt before they were brought across the Atlantic and the unity they (re)created after they were brought to North America. It also allows her to experience the sense of community that the Carriacou people feel. These threads and their interconnected nature show Avey that she belongs to the community of the African diaporic people. As a part of the African diaspora, and as an African American in the United States, she has ancestors and roots that ground her identity.

This rediscovery is not absolute but it is still significant. The ceremony itself “was the bare bones of a fete... All that was

left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums” (Marshall 240). The importance of the ceremony does not lie in its absolute recollection of the past. The ceremony is also a means for the Carriacou dancers to demonstrate their tenacity in clinging to their heritage, and their pride in claiming it. Avey and Jay had not only forgotten their pride in their heritage but also devalued themselves in forgetting it. Avey is now able to relate even further to the story of Ibo Landing. Her own “ritualistic shedding of individual and material values, which are associated in the novel with white America, echoes the Ibo’s self-preserving (and self-sacrificing) act” (McNeil 191). The Ibos realize that they have to leave the new land they have been brought to in order to preserve their self and community. Similarly, Avey has left behind the shell of material values so that her true self can emerge.

Having developed a new perception of herself and her community, Avey also awakens to the mission she inherits from her great-aunt Cuney “to retain and share” the story of Ibo Landing (McNeil 195). She recognizes the place of this story in the oral traditions and memories that bind the African diasporic community, and are crucial to the identity of its members (McNeil 195). She finally accepts responsibility for the sharing of the story and her duty to further “transfer responsibility for a valued practice” to another generation of African Americans (Noyes 233). According to Noyes, this transfer of responsibility is itself an intrinsic part of maintaining a tradition in a community. Avey’s awakening to this duty is

partially the result of Joseph Lebert’s sharing of the song of the Bongo dance with her. Lebert and the other Carriacou people keep this story alive by retelling it every year and dancing to it. In a similar fashion, Avey realizes that she too must replicate her great-aunt’s performative and oral act of taking young African American children to Tatem and telling them the story of Ibo Landing. Thus, she decides to relocate to her great-aunt’s house in Tatem so that her grandchildren and her daughter’s young students can visit her. Avey also carries with her letters from Lebert to his grandchildren in Canada and the United States so they too can be encouraged to travel to Carriacou to rediscover their cultural roots.

Although Avey eventually rediscovers her cultural heritage and recognizes her responsibility to share and transmit communal oral traditions, Paule Marshall’s story serves as a cautionary tale to the modern reader. Marshall suggests that vigilance is necessary to guard oral traditions against the eroding effects of materialism. The rituals and stories that are encoded in oral memories in this novel are transmitted within families and small communities, but they have an undeniable role to play in maintaining and remembering the unique heritage and experiences of a people. They further reinforce the sense of belonging that these individuals feel to their communities. Thus, Joseph Lebert becomes a mouthpiece for Paule Marshall when he cautions, “I tell you, you best remember them [the Old Parents]!... if not, they get vex and cause you trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute” (Marshall 165). Ultimately, this warning is not only directed at Avey but also at the reader of this novel to protect those family and community oral traditions with which he or she is entrusted.

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