

## **Never Too Late to Remember**

Cruising the Past in Paule Marshall's

*Praisesong for the Widow*

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Anna Scacchi

En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une  
bibliothèque qui brûle.

AMADOU HAMPATÉ BA (1901-1991)

### **ROUTES TO ROOTS**

Contrary to an imaginary that consigns them to lack of mobility, and in spite of the restrictions imposed by de jure and de facto segregation, ever since the Middle Passage African Americans have travelled across the Atlantic, as well as within the Americas. In the introduction to a recent special issue of *Tourism Geographies* devoted to "African Americans and Tourism" (2013), the editor Derek Alderman recalled "the highly discriminatory history of mobility and hospitality in the United States" (375), but also underlined that tourism industry has underrepresented the presence of African Americans as tourists, erasing their ability to negotiate the boundaries of segregation and racial hostility and travel on the edge of white supremacy. In spite of their invisibility, which has also affected Tourism Studies, where according to Alderman the conflicted relationship of African Americans and tourism remains underanalyzed, "African American tourists are an increasingly important and profitable segment of the travel market" (376).

In the last decades the tourism market has designed tourist experiences specifically targeting US blacks, especially those interested in visiting places connected with their culture and history. The booming of black heritage tourism is customarily traced back to the late 1970s. 1976 saw the publication of Alex Haley's novel *Roots*, relating the saga of the author's African American family from the kidnapping of his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, from his native village in 18th-century Gambia, to Haley's own genealogical research. *Roots* was an immediate success, but even more popular was its adaptation for the TV aired the following year, which brought African Americans and their history of enslavement and fight for citizenship in the homes of many white Americans for the first time. The novel sold one million copies in the first year and the TV miniseries, watched by more than one hundred million viewers in the United States, became a transnational blockbuster, with audience ratings in Australia and Europe almost paralleling those of the United States (Havens 32). According to Vernon Jordan, executive director of the National Urban League, the *Roots* miniseries "was the single most spectacular educational experience in race relations in America" (qtd in Pierson 19). It certainly helped pave the way for the national dialogue on slavery, segregation and racism that would slowly emerge in the following decades. For black Americans it constituted a turning point in their relationship both with Africa and with their history of enslavement.<sup>1</sup>

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1 | The story of Haley's successful, if largely fictive, search for roots and discovery of an African ancestor had a deep therapeutic and symbolic value for African Americans, since it offered a counterstory to the dominant narrative tracing black poverty back to slavery's supposed disruption of family ties, a narrative popularized by the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report. As Elisa Bordin has recently underlined, "Haley's telling of a two-hundred-years family story, able to trace his first African American forefather back in the 18th-century village of Juffure, has been perceived (and questioned) as an extraordinary accomplishment, in contrast with the general perception of

*Roots* spurred the popularity of tours in search of ancestral roots.<sup>2</sup> While back-to-Africa travel was not a novelty, due to the importance of the notion of diaspora for blacks in the Americas, the big change was in the numbers and in the social status of the African Americans engaging in heritage tours, who increasingly came from the middle class. Interestingly, this trend soon caught the attention of corporate capitalism and its marketing strategies: in 1994 McDonald's, a company with a keen interest in black consumers, partnered with the Haley Family Corporation to celebrate Black History Month with a nationwide sweepstakes offering winners a 10-day tour of Senegambia, West Africa. The "Adventure to the Homeland" sweepstakes was advertised in *Ebony* and *Jet* in February 1994. The large group that was selected included also members of the Haley family, an actor from the miniseries and two academics. The experience, one that many participants did not have the economic means to purchase, was openly framed by the sponsor as different from average

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slavery as a history of orphanhood, social death, and in general as an institution antagonistic to the maintenance of family ties" (Bordin 4).

2 | In the last decades heritage tours for black Americans have expanded to include places linked to slavery in the United States as well as the Caribbean. Black Americans are invited to heal the wounds inflicted by the trauma of slavery visiting not only the West African sites where their ancestors were imprisoned before the Middle Passage, but also more accessible plantations and slavery sites in the U.S. south. Heritage tourism in the United States, however, is often a disappointing experience for African Americans: in many plantations the main narrative is still centered on the "Big House" and the good life of its aristocratic dwellers, while the slave quarters are nothing more than an appendix to it, the pain, labor and cost in human lives needed to make that good life possible still silenced (see Halloran; Small, "Still Back of the Big House"). In December 2014, the Whitney Plantation, near Wallace, Louisiana, opened its doors to the public for the first time as the only plantation in the U.S. South with a focus on slavery. See Amsden.

tourism: it was a pilgrimage to a sacred place that symbolized the homecoming of diasporic Africans and the recovery of a lost origin.<sup>3</sup>

Travel to places related to the history of enslavement has become an important facet of the current memorialization of slavery and the slave trade. In this chapter I will analyze Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)—the story of a typical “sun-and-sand” Caribbean tour which turns into a search for roots for the African American protagonist—in the context of U.S. “roots tourism.” Slavery tourism involves U.S. blacks of all ages, but seems to be particularly appealing to seniors, partly because tours in the Caribbean and Africa require money and leisure time that younger people do not usually have, partly because of cultural reasons that are also at the heart of Paule Marshall's novel.<sup>4</sup> *Praisesong for the Widow* is the story of an identity quest that reconnects the middle-aged protagonist with her forgotten personal past and common racial memories, giving her life a renewed sense of purpose as she becomes a keeper of memories and bearer of alternative knowledge. Avey Johnson is a despondent old woman on the verge of retirement, whose cultural alienation is manifested in her middle class propriety and choice of typically “white” leisure activities. A well-off African American widow well in her sixties, Avey is touring the Caribbean on board the ship *Bianca Pride* with two women friends. All of a sudden she disembarks at the first port of call, Grenada, willing to go back to the comforts of her New York home. After years of denial of her black heritage in the attempt to secure economic stability and fight off

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3 | Stanford professor Paula Ebron, an anthropologist, was one of the two academics who travelled with the tour. They were not sponsored by McDonald's. For an account of her experience, see Ebron, “Tourists as Pilgrims.”

4 | In an article exploring the meanings of roots tourism as a response to a sense of loss and providing coping strategies to counteract feelings of marginalization, authors Carla Almeida Santos and Grace Yan write that their research shows that seniors of all ethnicities are the age group most interested in tracing their genealogy, making genealogical tourism one of the fastest-growing sectors of the tourism industry.

the degradation induced by poverty, Avey unexpectedly engages in a painful spiritual quest for her roots when she meets an old man, Lebert Joseph, who insists they are kin. She accepts the old man's invitation to join the annual ceremony celebrating the ancestors on the small island of Carriacou, which she reaches after a rough sea passage during which she half-consciously relives her enslaved forebears' sufferings in the crossing of the Atlantic. Her search for reconnection with her own and her community's past finally turns her into a visionary storyteller whose task, very much like a West African *jali's*, is keeping the memory of the ancestors alive among the younger generations.

Prompted by *Roots* and its TV adaptation, slavery tourism responded to an anxiety about cultural transmission and memory that was spreading in the African American community with the disappearance of the last generation who had a direct experience of slavery and the demise of the glorious Civil Rights Movement era. Older blacks who had lived through the 1960s fights for civil rights increasingly envisioned revisiting and coming to terms with a denied past as an act of responsibility towards the younger generations and their growing disillusionment with 'victories' which had failed to bring about real change. Slavery tourism, like the increasing amount of cultural texts remembering slavery, from film to fiction to TV series and visual art, emerges then as strategic postmemory, to borrow Marianne Hirsch's notion of imaginative investment with the past by generations coming after the traumatic event, whose lives are nevertheless marked by what they have not directly experienced. Like other forms of postmemory, slavery tourism aims to keep the past alive not as a history lecture but as an embodied experience (Woolfork), and to ward off young people's disconnection with their heritage.

Denied and silenced for many decades in the public spaces and cultural life of former slave societies, slavery has been recently granted greater visibility since, in the words of slavery historian Ira Berlin, "[t]here is a general, if inchoate, understanding that any attempt to address the question of race in the present must also ad-

dress slavery in the past. Slavery is ground zero of race relations” (3). Institutions in the Americas, Europe and Africa are increasingly aware of the need to build a public memory of slavery and they are funding initiatives, such as the rehabilitation of sites of slavery, the proclamation of memorial days and the construction of monuments and museums, in order to inscribe slavery in their national histories.<sup>5</sup> Although the tendency is to frame the memorialization of slavery in a self-absolving narrative of healing and progress, these initiatives also recognize that the past has shaped the present and envision slavery tourism as a pedagogical action aimed at building a more ethical future.<sup>6</sup>

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5 | Whereas Brazil and the Caribbean are dealing, albeit conflictually, with the role played by slavery in the making of their national identities and present-day societies, and some European countries are similarly trying to come to terms with their past via lieux de memoire that inscribe the slave trade and slavery in their national history, U.S. public culture is still characterized by a large void for what concerns slavery. While the historiography of slavery has changed dramatically since the 1950s, establishing the centrality of slavery to the history of the United States and to its notions of democratic citizenship and American freedom, a large gap divides “scholarly inquiry and public perceptions” (Foner xiii). This gap is probably one of the reasons why the United States still lacks a national museum devoted to slavery, in spite of having the largest number of museums in the world. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, where slavery is included in the narrative but does not constitute the main focus, opened in Washington, DC, on September 24th, 2016, on the last available slot on the National Mall. The project for a national slavery museum in Fredericksburg, VA, launched in 2001 by former Virginia governor Douglas Wilder, a descendant of slaves, has come to a halt, filing for bankruptcy. See Small, “Social Mobilization.”

6 | In November 2006, the UN General Assembly designated 25 March 2007 as the *International Day for the Commemoration of the Two-Hundredth Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Member States acknowledged that slavery was at the heart of “profound so-

Being a transnational leisure activity that is remarkably different from other types of tourism, both in expectations and affect on the part of visitors, and marketing strategies and expectations on the part of stakeholders, slavery tourism has attracted the attention of scholars from such various fields as anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies, and has become of interest to the field of Tourism Studies as well. As Saidiya Hartman remarked in her 2002 essay "The Time of Slavery," "the identifications and longings of the tourist, the formulas of roots tourism, and the economic needs of African states shape, affect, and influence our understanding of slavery and in concert produce a collective memory of the past" (758). It has become imperative, then, to go beyond a simplistic understanding of slavery tourism that relies on redemptive narratives of healing and homecoming, in order to investigate its complexities.

### **DOORS OF RETURN? DIASPORIC IDENTITIES AND THE LONGING FOR HOME**

Sites of slavery are contested memory, since they provide narratives that are interpreted differently by visitors, depending on their national origins, age, gender, class, as well as the locale where the "rememory" experience happens and the stakeholders involved in it.<sup>7</sup> As Ana Lucia Araujo has argued, "the promotion of the Atlantic

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cial and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice, which continue to affect people of African descent today" ("Protection of Human Rights" 829).

7 | See, for example, Paulla Ebron's analysis of the differences in response between African Americans at African sites of slavery, who envision themselves as pilgrims and are anchored to the past, and African American college students visiting Southern plantations, whose feelings of anger are geared to the present and are expressed as social and political criticism of the continuing exclusion of African Americans from full citizenship (Ebron, "Which Memory?"). On the different experiences of tourists, tourism oper-

slave trade heritage has been crucial to the development of a West African tourism industry" (145) and, as a consequence, capitalizing on African Americans' diasporic longing for home has produced narratives that reinvent, recreate, commodify and at times manipulate the past, often eliding the role played by Africans in the slave trade and marketing as slavery sites places with a dubious history.<sup>8</sup> These narratives respond to the complex needs of this specific tourism segment, which participates in the exoticizing attitude typical of the Western "tourist gaze" but at the same time differs from it in its framing of the tour through tropes of familial reunion and recovery of a lost heritage.<sup>9</sup>

Since the 1994 launching of the Slave Route Project by UNESCO and the World Tourism Organization, with the aim to break the silence about slavery, as well as to "foster economic and human development and to rehabilitate, restore and promote the tangible and intangible heritage handed down by the slave trade for the purpose of cultural tourism,"<sup>10</sup> Ghana's slave forts have come to dominate U.S. blacks' imagined genealogy, even though the country had a relatively

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ators and local stakeholders, see Bruner, Holsey, "Transatlantic Dreaming" and *Routes of Remembrance*, Reed, "The Commemoration of Slavery Heritage" and *Pilgrimage Tourism*. On the difficult relationship of African American slavery tourists with Africa and their recent discomfort with the "Roots narrative," see Wood, "What Is Africa to Me—Now?"

8 | See, for example, Palmié 370-372, about the controversy over the *Maison des Esclaves* at Gorée.

9 | Tour guides, as Ann Reed found in her field research, adjust their interpretations and language "to suit the sensibilities of tourists that demand a narrative of African solidarity" ("The Commemoration of Slavery Heritage" 101) and in spite of the commemorations being framed as a transracial and transnational effort at coming to terms with the past and healing its wounds, African American tourists are often placed on separate groups from whites and offered the homecoming experience that they are after (102).

10 | Accra Declaration on the UNESCO/WTO Cultural Tourism Programme on the Slave Route, 1995, quoted in Timothy and Teye 116.



minor importance as a slave trading region as compared to the Bight of Benin and West Central Africa.<sup>11</sup> The narrative developed in these sites revolves around the notion of return to a lost homeland, which is central to diasporic consciousness. Communication between Ghanaians and African diaspora tourists, however, is fraught with tensions and contradictions because what for the former is above all an economic opportunity, is for the latter an identity quest and homecoming. The intercourse between the natives, who regard African Americans as *obronis*, that is wealthy Western tourists, and the typical “roots tourist” expecting to be received as a lost brother and regarding the travel experience as transformative and sacred, can be highly conflictual. As many scholars have underlined, African American tourists are often disappointed at the welcome-back narrative they are offered, which seems contrived (see Hartman, *Loose Your Mother*; Reed, *Pilgrimage Tourism*; Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance*). Many African American visitors object to the glamorizing of the forts, aimed at making them attractive tourist destinations, and even regard their restoration as an act of whitewashing that attempts to erase the horrors of the slave trade (see Hahn). While they deem a dismal appearance more appropriate to sites of mourning, on their part local audiences are annoyed by the predominance of slavery in the historical narratives of the castles, whose life has of course con-

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11 | Ghana is a favourite destination for blacks from the United States because it is an English-speaking country and a relatively stable African nation with a long history of cultural and political exchange with African Americans. Since 1957, when it gained its independence from the British, Ghana has become the African nation with the highest number of African American residents. President Kwame Nkrumah, who had studied in the United States and was friends with many black intellectuals and political leaders, launched a brotherhood policy towards African Americans, encouraging them to relocate to Ghana and help build the nation. His socialist ideals attracted the support of W.E.B. Du Bois and his wife, who moved to Ghana and became citizens, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright and Martin Luther King, jr, among others.

tinued beyond the slave trade era, and at the reduction of Africa to the point of origin of Black America.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the conflictuality of slavery tourism, the return narrative is never really challenged and continues to keep its hold on U.S. blacks' imagination. When Barack Obama visited Africa for the first time as president in 2009, in one of his first mandate's most symbolical acts for the African American community, he went to Ghana. Though he made no mention of the slave trade in his remarks addressed to the Ghanaian Parliament, he visited Cape Coast Castle with his family, and like many other African American visitors passed through the "Door of No Return," and then turned back and pointed to his daughters the new sign hanging on the gate, reading "Door of Return."<sup>13</sup> The sign was put up in 1998, when the first Emancipation Day was celebrated and the remains of two slaves were brought back from Jamaica and the United States and buried at Assin Manso, a site along the slave route. Reentering through the Door of Return has become a ritual, symbolizing Ghana's willingness to welcome their diasporic kin, that tour guides invite tourists to perform, as Cheryl Finley underlines in "The Door of (No) Return":

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**12** | As Salamishah Tillet argues in *Sites of Slavery*, "heritage tourism works as a form of African American exceptionalism that posits and arrests 'Africa' solely as a site of slavery and thereby denies the specificity and contemporaneity of West-African nation-states. [...] These countries, and by extension much of postcolonial West Africa, now loom as the exclusive mnemonic propertles of the African American heritage tourist" (97).

**13** | Obama's remarks on the visit emphasized the need to remember but also the progress made from the time of the slave trade: "I'll never forget the image of my two young daughters, the descendants of Africans and African Americans, walking through those doors of no return, but then walking back those [sic] doors of return. It was a remarkable reminder that while the future is unknowable, the winds always blow in the direction of human progress." On the "Door of Return" see Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance* 188-190.

At Cape Coast Castle, the Door of No Return is often the last stop on the guided tour, a climactic moment where visitors watch in quiet anticipation as the guide opens the door to reveal the expanse of angry sea where enslaved Africans would have been led to awaiting ships. [...]

Finally, as the guide motions to the group that it is time to go back inside, he points out a relatively new sign above the door, visible from the outside upon reentry. In the now-recognizable neat white lettering, it reads, "DOOR OF RETURN." Placed there as a gesture of reconciliation, the guide explains that is meant to welcome back the thousands of African Diaspora tourists who flock to the monuments each year.

As Finley argues in the rest of her article, however, return as an act signifying the healing of the trauma of slavery is hardly possible: "Is the sign simply a marketing tool aimed at the African Diaspora segment of the tourist industry?" In a similar vein, Saidiya Hartman has asked, "To what degree can the journey of the 'native stranger' be termed a return?" ("The Time of Slavery" 759), pointing out the inadequacy of the notion of homecoming to describe what such journeys entail.

In other words, is return possible for African diaspora people? Is home and the reconstruction of a common origin possible at all for the descendants of slaves in the Americas? As historian Robin Kelley has remarked, the nature of the relationship with Africa as home is at the heart of the diaspora paradigm (71). In academic discourse, where the diasporic paradigm for the analysis of black people's experience in the Americas came into extended use in the 1960s, the usage of the term "African Diaspora" relies on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community," stressing the construction of cultural identity "through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 24) and highlighting the fictive elements of diasporic consciousness, that is the vision of and longing for the homeland, the feelings of alienation, the desire for return. Roots tourism, however, seems to rely less on a figurative understanding of return

than on the notion of an actual reconnection with lost origins, that inevitably plays on biology. In this sense, the question posed by Stuart Hall in his essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?"—that is, whether it is time to go beyond the "essentializing moment," which was instrumental in constituting black cultural identity, "because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic" (29)—is answered in the negative by slavery tourism.

Is there a way to envision what people of African descent in the Americas have in common in non-essentialist terms? That is, in terms that do not rely on blood and genetic heritage, but rather recognize that blackness is "a politically and culturally *constructed* category" and, as a consequence, make space for the "immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 444)? At first reading, *Praisesong for the Widow* seems to sit squarely within a discourse of essentialized African continuity in the diaspora, usually associated with Afrocentric ideologies, which is predominant in slavery tourism's narratives targeting U.S. blacks. Whereas Avey's remembering tour takes place wholly within the Americas, in staging the Caribbean and South Carolina as places whose blackness is more authentic because they have maintained strong ties with Africa, the novel seemingly shares slavery tourism's belief in the possibility of reconnection with the homeland and recovery of lost origins. Avey Johnson's trajectory in the novel, indeed, goes from a northern bourgeois space associated with the United States and whiteness, the North White Plains neighborhood where she has moved with her husband in their flight from the chaos of the ghetto, to a culturally rich black Southern space that stands for Africa. The Caribbean island of Carriacou and the Gullah culture of Tatem, an imaginary place modeled on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, point to a diasporic black community which has preserved its cultural Africanism almost intact.

Avey's, then, is apparently a journey from a racially inauthentic middle-class existence where black folk culture and religion are

rejected, to a spiritual reunion with her true, pure black self. Her spiritual journey ends in the rejection of a false identity, a white mask, and the embracing of her authentic black essence. Yet, in placing Africa in the distance—as an origin that is retrievable only as names that can no longer be pronounced properly, fragments of a few songs, and shadows of long-ago dances (240)—and envisioning the protagonist's return as a bridging movement between New York, where Avey will hunt down the oblivious children of the Civil Rights Movement generation with her stories, and Tatem, where she will take on her great-aunt's role as keeper of memories for the younger generations, Marshall complicates the trope of return. As Caroline Brown underlines in *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art*, reading *Praisesong for the Widow* as a praisesong to authenticity and unmediated African continuity, as some black feminists have done, is problematic as it posits an original lost identity “that elides the tensions of the historical past, the present moment, and heterogeneous, often conflicting, forms of cultural affiliation,” creating “a symbolic hierarchy of original, authentic African culture and inauthentic, white capitalist/consumerist culture” (118). In the novel home is not Africa, nor the erasure of “Africa” by a white mask, but a mobile, dynamic space connecting different places and identities. As Simon Gikandi remarked in his pioneering work *Writing in Limbo*, what remains of Africa in *Praisesong for the Widow* is “merely the fragment of (an ideal) memory” (95), Marshall's theme being not return but separation and loss. At the same time that *Praisesong* mourns the impossibility of return, however, the novel celebrates the resilience of the creolized identities of the African diaspora in the New World, inviting its readers to engage in the fight against their civic disenfranchisement in the United States.

### MEMORY AND A NECESSARY DISTANCE OF THE MIND: SURVIVING IN THE DIASPORA

The cover of the first edition of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* affords the reader a glimpse of the novel's protagonist. A very proper middle-aged woman, recently widowed, Avey Johnson stands propped against a sea landscape at the bottom of the book cover wearing pearls, a touch of pink lipstick, an elegant matching dress and jacket, and a white hat. Relegated to the margins by the imposing title and author's name, which take up most of the space, she looks frail, perplexed and almost unsubstantial. The artist, Judith Kazdym Leeds, a well-known illustrator who also created the dust jacket for Alice Walker's *Color Purple*, managed to capture the *comme-il-faut* quality of the protagonist's appearance and, above all, her feelings of displacement and unbelonging at the beginning of the novel. Avey and her two friends are the only blacks in a group of senior American tourists who are enjoying the lavish food, luxury cabins and halls and exotic sights their money bought and know nothing about the places they are visiting. Neither does Avey, for that matter, since not only is she completely unaware of the existence of a black diaspora, she has also managed to forget much about her own identity as a black American in her social climbing. Urged by her racially conscious daughter Marion to choose a destination where she could learn something important for her, such as Brazil or Ghana, instead of a "meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks" (13), she had stubbornly stuck to her plan and packed six suitcases of clothes and accessories for her trip.

In spite of the leisure class context framing her first appearance Avey is only a few years away from the ghetto, which she fled together with her husband in order to find economic and social security and resist the degrading force of racism. Aghast at the breaking down of their marriage life induced by poverty, the couple embraced a middle-class ethics of hard work and saving that brought them from the old, dilapidated tenements of Halsey Street, Brooklyn, to the safety of a predominantly white neighborhood. Avey's climbing

of the social and racial ladder has meant denying her cultural heritage, her love for black music and dance, her gusto for vaudeville jokes, her sensuality. Above all, it has meant erasing from her memory the teachings she received from her great-aunt Cuney in Tatem, who through the ritual telling of the story of the Ibo Landing—the account of how the chained Ibos, seeing what awaited them in the New World, had walked across the Atlantic back to Africa, a story which she had unquestioningly believed until the age of ten—had entrusted her with a mission “she couldn’t even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill” (42). In order to become acceptable to her white neighbors she has forgotten her mission and cloaked her blackness, cultural and physical, under a white mask, a protective layer of propriety and self-control. So much so that she often does not recognize herself when she glances at her reflection in a mirror (141). The same white mask she glimpsed on the face of her husband, after his transformation from loving, carefree Jay to hard-working, sanctimonious Jerome.

The novel’s title, however, anticipates that Avey’s estrangement from her heritage and sense of unbelonging will be defeated, as praisesongs in African traditions celebrate heroes and sing their achievements. The Fanonian notion of white mask is a central structuring metaphor for the novel’s narrative, which seems to frame Avey’s quest as a successful discarding of her false identity and recovery of her true black self. The text, indeed, repeatedly lingers on Avey’s body, describing it as stately and regal, dwelling on its African features, which she hides under fashionable clothes subscribing to white middle-class aesthetics, comparing it to an African queen’s or a Dahomey female warrior’s. Avey’s white mask is threatened by her black body, whose Africanness can be repressed but not erased. And it is precisely because of her body that her voyage back begins.

After a few days on the *Bianca Pride*, Avey starts to feel “not herself.” She has an odd feeling of cloggedness and swollenness, as if she had gorged herself upon the fancy foods offered in the ship’s restaurants. She feels uneasy, almost haunted, because of strange visions that keep superimposing images of violence and death on

her surroundings. The old American tourists she is travelling with appear to her as skeletons, trying to grab her and draw her into their death-in-life. She is particularly troubled by the odd dream she had about her great-aunt Cuney, with whom she used to spend her summer vacations as a child, and who named her Avatara after her enslaved ancestor. In the dream, the old woman appeared outside her house in North White Plains, beckoning Avey to go back with her to the Ibo Landing, the place where she used to take the child and tell her stories about her ancestor. As she resisted her aunt's command they started to fight, and Avey was ashamed that the whole neighborhood was looking on while they behaved like typical low-down blacks.

When she finally lands ashore on Grenada, she finds herself surrounded by a multitude of loud gay people in festive clothes, speaking Patois and carrying packages, eagerly lining up to board dingy boats. They are heading, as she learns later, for the small island of Carriacou for the annual excursion, where they will participate in the Big Drum dance, a ceremony reconnecting them to the Old Parents, that is, the African ancestors brought as slaves to the Americas. At the harbor, while she is waiting for a taxi to take her to the airport, she struggles against the feeling of familiarity evoked by the Patois, which reminds her of the accents of the people in Tatem, and the friendly greetings from the people surrounding her, who seem to treat her as kin. Like Mona, the protagonist of Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa*, who shouts "I'm American, I'm not African," when she is grabbed by white men in the dungeons of Cape Coast castle, Avey tries to stick to her status as an American citizen, rejecting connection with these people, but to no avail, as her black body has already begun to take her back "to her source."<sup>14</sup> Her expensive

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**14** | Sankofa is an Akan word meaning "go back and retrieve," and Gerima's film approaches the memorialization of slavery from a diasporic perspective. Mona, an African American woman who is modeling for a fashion shoot at Cape Coast Castle, is confronted by an old African man who urges her to go back "to her source." While visiting the castle's dungeons with other



clothes no longer seem able to contain her resurfacing blackness and separate her from the black diasporic community:

The problem was, she decided, none of them seemed aware of the fact that she was a stranger, a visitor, and a tourist, although this should have been obvious from the way she was dressed and the set of matching luggage at her side. But from the way they were acting she could have been simply one of them there on the wharf. (69)

After a painful night of wake at the 5-star hotel where she stays, waiting for the next plane home—when she recollects the early happy years of her marriage and the racism and economic troubles that made her husband turn into a money-making machine, and she is finally able to mourn Jay's death—Avey realizes that in their struggle to survive they had given up themselves and wonders if there might have been another way:

Couldn't they have done differently? Hadn't there perhaps been another way? [...] Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own. And strength. It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. To take only what was needed and to run. And distance. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential. (139)

A distance of the mind, a divided self: the notion of a belonging that is also at the same time a belonging elsewhere—what W.E.B. Du

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tourists she is snatched back to the past and sent to an American plantation as a slave. We then follow her fate as Shola, a houseslave abused by her master. She becomes part of a rebellion and when she is killed she flies back to the slave castle, where she joins other members of the diaspora in a ceremony.

Bois had termed “double conscioussness” in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—brings to Avey’s mind Aunt Cuney’s words about her ancestor’s strategy to cope with her enslavement. After watching the Ibos take a long look around and, seeing the suffering that was to come, turn and walk back over the ocean to Africa, “she just picked herself up and took off after ‘em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...” (39). As a ten-year-old child, at this point of the story Avey had wondered, “But how come they didn’t drown, Aunt Cuney?” a question she had never asked before, and had flinched at the sad, disappointed look her aunt had given her. Now her early unquestioning acceptance of the Ibo Landing myth—which according to Western epistemology cannot but be collective suicide, but is a powerful symbol of resistance in black diasporic folklore—comes back, signalling her renewed openness to alternative knowledge and her future choice of spiritual truth over factual reality.<sup>15</sup> As soon as morning comes she starts wandering on the beach, her new mental disposition signified by her dishevelled appearance. Her chance meeting with Lebert Joseph (an obvious reference to the Yoruba god of the crossroads, Eshu-Elegba), who keeps asking what her nation is and to whom she finds herself telling all about her sickness, the dream and her sudden decision to leave the cruise, will trigger a process of remembering reconnecting her with the ancestral roots her mind is oblivious to but her body still remembers. This process

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**15** | The Ibo Landing myth, based on a historical event happened in 1803 at Saint Simons Island, Georgia, permeates African American folklore and is a powerful symbol of cultural resistance in black literature. The motif of the return home of enslaved Africans, either by flying or walking back on the ocean is ubiquitous in the African diaspora in the New World (see Powell). According to Marshall, *Praisesong* began when she read about the Ibo Landing in a book of interviews with elderly Sea Islands people who had been slaves, conducted in the 1930s by Works Project Administration employees (qtd in Wall 184).

culminates with the Big Drum dance, which she initially attends as an observer and then joins, "dancing her nation."<sup>16</sup>

In leaving the white tour and its senile participants Avey leaves a journey without meaning, that cannot offer anything besides mere diversion in the way to death and seems to extend life as duration, and embarks on a spiritual journey which will grant her a new life and sense of purpose. Avey's Caribbean journey, differently from the heritage tours to African slavery sites in search for a mythic homeland, that aim to restore the point in time before slavery, reconnects her with diasporic blacks in the Americas through ties that are cultural and political more than blood-based. By means of a sea passage where Avey suffers the painful experiences of the Middle Passage, her journey shifts the focus on the fact of slavery and the links connecting blacks in the Diaspora rather than on a mythic ancestral home. The novel's ending, with the final recovery of her diasporic heritage, does not include the dream of an impossible return home, but envisions instead her future role in the United States as a spiritual guide for the younger generations, teaching them how to live in the diaspora with a necessary distance of the mind.

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16 | On the Carriacou Big Drum and Nations Dance, see McDaniel, which was inspired by Marshall's novel and adopts its four-section structure ("Runagate," "Sleeper's Wake," "Lavè Tête," and "The Beg Pardon"), and Taylor.

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