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Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways

Travels in Deep Southern Time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-creole Authority

KEITH CARTWRIGHT

on Paule Marshall

2013

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS *Athens and London*

E
185.86
C327
2013

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Athens, Georgia 30602
www.ugapress.org
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Set in Sabon MT Pro and Whitney by Graphic Composition, Inc.
Manufactured by Thomson-Shore
The paper in this book meets the guidelines for
permanence and durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the
Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America
17 16 15 14 13 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cartwright, Keith, 1960–
Sacral grooves, limbo gateways : travels in deep Southern time, Circum-Caribbean space, Afro-creole authority / Keith Cartwright.
pages cm. — (The new Southern studies)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-8203-4536-9 (hardcover : alkaline paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8203-4536-9 (hardcover : alkaline paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-8203-4599-4 (paperback : alkaline paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8203-4599-7 (paperback : alkaline paper)
1. African Americans—Southern States—Social life and customs.
2. Creoles—Southern States—Social life and customs.
3. Blacks—Caribbean Area—Social life and customs.
4. Creoles—Caribbean Area—Social life and customs.
5. Space and time—Social aspects.
6. Authority—Social aspects.
7. Southern States—Social life and customs.
8. Caribbean Area—Social life and customs.
9. American literature—Southern States—History and criticism.
10. Caribbean literature (English)—
History and criticism. I. Title.
E185.86.C327 2013
305.896'073075—dc23 2012041531

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

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on Paule Marshall
in historical +
cultural context

CHAPTER ONE

Down to the Mire

Travels, Shouts, and Saraka in Atlantic Praise-Housings

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on a strange cassava,
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic god—
Grins, cries
Amen,
Shouts hosanna.
—Jean Toomer, "Conversion," *Cane* (1923)

Jesus been down
  down to de mire
Sister Josie, you must come
  down to de mire
—"Down to de Mire," *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1940)

From W. E. B. Du Bois to Jean Toomer, several key early authors of African American modernity turned southward to Gullah/Geechee terrain—the Altamaha, the Georgia rice fields, the shout-driven rhythms of the Charleston—to dip their art into living waters of a folk authority more complex and transfiguring than they could know. Their texts bear poignant, often opaque witness. As Toomer's *Cane*, for example, depicts a Georgia folk culture in urban migration and modernizing transition, it also registers a conservative remnant, the "African Guardian of Souls" who, though "converted," remains present as another kind of converting force working from within a counterculture of modernity. Toomer's "Conversion" reveals that whatever else Afro-Atlantic Protestant conversion has been, it has emerged from a creolizing double agency wherein the Soul Guardian says *Amen*, shouts liminal grooves that congregate workings of old African genius.[1]

Along *Cane*'s swamp trails, African goat paths, and Dixie Pikes, we enter a limbo gateway between Africa and the Americas. This "limbo imagination of

the folk"—with Toomer's Guardian of Souls—passed supply through "the gateway complex between cultures" conceptualized by Wilson Harris, and herein readers too are called ever-lower into saltmarsh and mire, to identify "with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples."[2] Going down to the mire entails a journey into deaths and birth-crampings of global modernity. In the lowcountry of coastal Carolina, Georgia, northeast Florida—and its routings into/from a wider Atlantic world—Afro-creole praise societies used ring shouts like "Down to the Mire" to construct limbo gateways of conversion, testing flexibility, restoring suppleness, undoing and redoing the calling-responsive boundaries of individual members, to build structures of corporate and even judicial agency.

Language also emerges converted and converting from this gateway. Especially at the creole contact zone—the most charged site of the African linguistic substrate's submerged authority—the word bears stunningly limber witness. How can we know this "mire" down to which the seeker may be called? Is it the "area of wet, soggy, and muddy ground" of *Webster's New College Dictionary*?[3] If it is the "myuh" recorded by WPA interviewers from Georgia ring shouters descended from African Muslims, might it be the Pulaar *maayo* (or "river") recalled by the Muslim headman Salih Bilali to the Georgia "master" who held legally defining title to him? Or the "'Mighty Myo,' which figures as a river of death" in a "sorrow song" noted by Du Bois?[4] Might this ring-shouted "myuh" also have ties to the emergence of Jamaican *myal*, which Edward Long first described in 1789 as a recent establishment, "a myal dance . . . a kind of society" that renders its initiates "invulnerable" to whites through its spirit-guarding ring dance performed—as a missionary wrote from Jamaica in the 1840s—mostly by women, backed by the ritual circle's humming and timekeeping: "by hands and feet and the swaying of their bodies"?[5] How comprehend the word given so much linguistic and performative supplement? This gateway of limbo performance calls for respectful apprenticeship (sacrificial expenditures of ego), as we see in Lydia Parrish's description from Georgia: "Of all the ring-shouts I know, 'Down to de Mire' is in more ways than one the most interesting. In the center of the ring, one member gets down on his knees and, with head touching the floor, rotates with the group as it moves around the circle. The different shouters, as they pass, push the head 'down to the mire.'"[6] Here, the "mire" or "myuh" signifies in performed, embodied relation to restored black Atlantic behaviors. But what are the convergent memories that find restoration in this myuh/maayo/myal/mire? Christian and Islamic prayer? The "I bow my head to the ground" of the *moforibale* and *moyuba* (Yoruba ritual greetings or prayer) in which "[o]ne head honors another by going to the floor"?[7] When we encounter a word, say "death" or "god," we must ask how it travels and has reached across the gulfs of various contact zones. We should reconsider,

in this context, the Latin *religare* ("to bind back," "retie," "bond") basing our "religion," and its closest Yoruba equivalent: the *awo* ("secret" or "initiate knowledge") embedded in divinations of the *babalawo* (guardian-father of secrets).[8] We may recognize that Toomer's African Guardian of Souls, in saying "Amen" to religion while also channeling nations of guarded knowledge, asserts a reciprocal model of agency that challenges Americans' genealogical assumptions.[9]

More than any Anglo–North American contact zone, the Sea Islands of Carolina, Georgia, and northeast Florida have served as sacred groves of the African Guardian of Souls' submerged authority. From lowcountry landings, commercial lines of triangulation connected the Sea Islands to the British Isles, Africa, and the West Indies. We may first notice lines running from Barbados to Charleston along routes of "the odyssey" of Barbadian settlement of Carolina—founded as the colony of a Caribbean colony.[10] In the wake of the American Revolution we may chart routes from Charleston, Savannah, and St. Augustine ports, moving Loyalists and enslaved or allied Africans and creoles to the Bahamas, Jamaica, and throughout the Atlantic world.[11] The War of 1812 left more crosshatching on our nautical maps, moving free black refugees from coastal plantations to repatriation in Trinidad.[12] These flows of people, goods, ideas, and language shaped complex anglo-creole assemblages in interface with other Atlantic assemblages. Along with Deleuze and Guattari, we find "*[c]ollective assemblages of enunciation*" moving in rhizomatic patterns, "agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive" in "a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages."[13] The lowcountry's creole language (Gullah or Geechee) offers vital perspective on complex machineries of globalization and countercultural feedback.

The salt marsh is rhizome. Amid tidal flows over oysterbeds and mudflats, groves of arborescence (live oak hammocks) rise over sediment-trapping baffles of sweetgrass and spartina that extend precarious terrain. Resurrection fern and Spanish moss cover gigantic limbs of the oaks prized for use in the curved ribs of sailing ships. The lowcountry is a gateway of terrestrial, riverine, and marine flows. Any effort to territorialize this space within a strictly national narrative can account for only part of the Sea Islands' cultural history. Indeed, the creole cultures around Charleston, Savannah, and Jacksonville test the waters separating the plantation South from the West Indies, and the Americas from Africa. Here we may find rites of psychic and social reassembly that work points of maximal Afro-creole authority to form a deep nexus of Afro-Atlantic Protestantism. It is an orphaned authority, however, long seen as "mumbo jumbo" or as a pinch of marketable local flavor thickening a vacation economy's okra soup. Its temporal-spatial perspectives of relation are rapidly being vacated as gated "plantation" communities reterritorialize

Geechee space and insert themselves over marsh grasses' old baffles and expensively "renourished" beaches. The hold of Gullah/Geechee communities upon ancestral land and ties to transgenerational embodied knowledge—what French historian Pierre Nora terms "environments of memory"—has grown so tenuous that Congress passed the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act in 2006, allocating $15 million over ten years to establish the "Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor" for the "preservation and interpretation of the Gullah/Geechee cultural heritage."[14]

The notion that Afro-creole rites and environments of memory might offer epistemological value is new to most people of Western education and upwardly mobile aspiration, be they white or "of color." Could the enslaved really have fashioned, in their hodgepodge "mumbo jumbo," model reassemblies of cross-cultural desire and authority? The Presbyterian slaveholder, Rev. Charles Colcock Jones of Liberty County, Georgia, voiced his frustration over the slaves' unwillingness to stick to the script of their standard hymnals: "The public worship of God should be conducted *with reverence and stillness on the part of the congregation;* nor should the minister . . . encourage . . . responses or noises, or outcries of any kind during the progress of divine worship; nor boisterous singing immediately at its close," adding that "[o]ne great advantage in teaching them good psalms and hymns is that they are thereby induced to lay aside the extravagant and nonsensical chants, and catches and hallelujah songs of their own composing and when they sing . . . they will have something profitable to sing."[15] Similarly, one Methodist contributor to the *Southern Christian Advocate* in 1846 complained of the "deplorable exhibition of pseudo religion" in Gullah praise societies and of the "remarkable tenacity" of "ancient superstitions, handed down by tradition and propagated by so called *leaders*." He asserts that "[i]nstead of giving up their visionary religionism, embracing the simple truth . . . our missionaries find them endeavoring to incorporate their superstitious rites with a purer system of instruction, producing thereby a hybrid, crude, and undefinable medley of truth and falsehood."[16] Such hybrid medleys seem to have traveled well.

The 1843 complaints of the English Baptist missionary James Phillippo in Jamaica point to a regional black Atlantic religious movement: "[A]t the conclusion of the war with America, some who had been imported from that continent, mysteriously blending together important truths and extravagant puerilities, assumed the office of teachers and preachers, disseminating far and wide their pernicious follies."[17] Likewise, the *Bahama Argus* printed an editorial in 1831 arguing against official sanction of black Baptist preachers who had established island congregations following the (mostly Gullah) Loyalist migration of 1783–84: "[A]lthough temporary fear of censure may induce a degree of demure decorum among them, yet there would be a proportionate want of real reverence for what they deem a 'John Canoe' exhibition . . . more in conformity with the noisy rites of Bacchus, than with the sober doctrines of the Christian faith."[18] While Rev. Phillippo, Rev. Jones, the *Bahama Argus*, and the *Southern Christian Advocate* sought to block the flows and production of black sacral desire and authority—and organize them along lines of plantation profitability—African guardians of soul performance were not easily stilled. A certain carnivalesque "noise" unsettled white missionaries. But their real fear was of countercultural black authority in congregation: an orphaned agency of gulfs that may still baffle the "purer system" of instruction to which we are all variously subject.

As Sea Island and West Indian cultures developed in interface, Afro-Christian praise societies channeled conversions of ancestral spirits and Holy Spirit in three key ways: (1) via initiatory patterns of seeking and narrating authoritative vision in spiritual "travels"; (2) via polyrhythmic ring shouts that sustained linkages of body, mind, and spirit; and (3) via sacrificial economies of remembering the dead and feeding the children. This chapter essays an archaeology of rites by which lowcountry praise societies spread Afro-Atlantic Baptist congregations to places as far-flung as the Bahamas, Trinidad, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone.[19] We will examine how these praise-housings have fed contemporary literary stepchildren. Calls issued in 1993 by Cornel West for a "politics of conversion" and Paul Gilroy for a "politics of transfiguration" had indeed already been sounded in a literature by (or of) women seeking to conserve and remodel (post)plantation praise-house assemblies.[20] These Geechee-infused novel travel-tracts (Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Erna Brodber's *Myal*, Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment*, and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, to name a remarkable artistic congregation assembled in a fifteen-year period between 1977 and 1992) have contested the white-supremacist, patriarchal filiations of the church. These works often take shape as conversion "tracks" under the spiritual parentage of a powerful female "pointer." They foster alternative spaces of sanctuary and bear witness to a cosmopolitan conservatism emergent from forced navigation in a globalizing world.

"You Compel to See That Baby"—A Heterodox Conservatism in the House

With independent African Baptist congregations formed in Savannah and Augusta by 1777, Georgia became a gateway from which black missionary agency spread throughout the U.S. South and the anglo-Caribbean.[21] Mechal Sobel has described the attractions of the Baptist faith for enslaved Africans, the compatibility of Baptist rites and worldview with African practices, Baptist grounding in ecstatic regeneration of the spirit, and the appeal of congregational independence.[22] While the highly visible ministries of George Liele,

David George, and Andrew Bryan were spreading black Baptist institutional agency in Georgia, the predominantly Africa-born plantation communities of coastal Georgia, which had experienced a surge of slave population—increasing from about 420 in 1751 to 16,000 in 1773 after massive importations—were bringing conversions to bear on Christianity.[23] Although documentary evidence for the emergence of antebellum bush arbor and praise-house societies is sparse, colonial Christian activity, coupled with the prestige of Savannah's independent Afro-Baptist ministries, appears to have been strong enough that Protestantism became the dominant element of black religion in Georgia between 1775 and 1815, and Georgia émigrés proved seminal in transporting their Baptist faith across an Afro-Atlantic world.[24] By making use of a variety of older sources—augmented by interviews with ex-slaves collected by the Georgia Writers' Project (1940), Lydia Parrish (1942), and Lorenzo Turner (1949)—and comparing this material with practices presumably carried to the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Trinidad by Georgians between 1783 and 1816, we may chart assemblage-structures by which Geechee praise societies helped to initiate a creolizing Baptist faith in the Caribbean.

Margaret Creel has described how Gullah praise societies served as the social, spiritual, and judicial force of the enslaved, building such community alignment that "reportedly there were no orphans on the Sea Islands."[25] Entry into Gullah societies found initiatory culmination in a period of spiritual travel known as seeking or mourning. This journey "in the wilderness" began with the seeker being apprenticed to a spiritual parent who monitored the seeker's travels (dreams, visions, prayer) for signs that the seeker was prepared for examination.[26] Head bound with white cloth or a single string, the seeker/mourner chose a secret retreat for repeated daily and nightly prayer over a period of months. Something of the mourner's prior construction of self would be sacrificed in the process. The mourner, usually but not always near the liminal age of twelve, would face a ritual rending of accustomed first-person perspective in the face of the sublime, a series of spirit-signs (accompanied by the spiritual parent's interpretive guidance into the society's symbolic order), followed by a resacralization of the extended self's new first-person plurality (as composite "I" bound of body-soul-spirit, serving as vessel of spirit-entities and as a responsible society member).[27] The "leader" was charged with preparing the seeker to deliver a testimonial of her travels to the congregation's examining committee. Recalling her own experience, Rosina Cohen spoke of how

> If you seek religion, you compel to see that baby. And what is that baby? Your soul, your soul is the baby, you understand. And you got to go to him and ask, "Lord, I ain't see my baby this month." And you beg him and beg him; and at last when he give [it to] you, you wash it off nice and clean. Oh Lord! I so glad to have a baby. Oh, I run around, carry it to my leader; tell him. He say: "That's your soul; that's your soul. The baby is your soul. Don't let nobody fool you; the baby is your soul."[28]

These "travel" narratives, three of which Lorenzo Turner collected in his landmark *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949), appear to be a key Sea Island genre for allowing society members to find voice and witness for their wilderness experiences via congregationally shepherded conventions of cooperative agency in the face of an otherwise devouring chattel slavery. This process of "seeking Jesus" was a Christian rite, informed by the first Great Awakening of evangelical Protestantism with its emphasis on visions, dreams, prayer retreat, catching the spirit, baptismal initiation, and public "taking of experience."[29] Yet something else found play here since Georgia's black population harbored a rich set of linguistic and travel experiences from various African nations, southeastern Indian nations, and much of the Caribbean—from St. Kitts to Curaçao.[30]

The lowcountry was populated by peoples familiar with rice culture—the Gola, Kissi, Vai, Mende, and various Senegambian peoples—for all of whom, according to Creel, the experience of bush initiation's incorporations into spiritual personhood "was a shared memory."[31] As Creel remarks of Sande and Poro initiations among the peoples of upper Guinea who proved crucial to the development of Gullah/Geechee culture, youths were sequestered in the bush for initiation where, guided by elders, they "underwent a travel, a series of terrifying dreams in which they were symbolically eaten by the Poro or Sande spirit . . . and then reborn by the same spiritual force."[32] Praise-house processes of initiation coalesced from the many sources that shaped the members' travel experiences. One missionary complained in 1847 that there was "no distant element of Christian experience involved in the whole affair," as he wrote disparagingly of the authority accorded to the spiritual mother "to whom the seeker relates all his '*travel.*' "[33] His *Southern Christian Advocate* report insists, "This word *travel* . . . is one of the most significant in their language, and comprehends all those exercises, spiritual, visionary and imaginative, which make up an 'experience.' "[34] Geechee praise societies used their congregationally valued travel genres to help members claim the authority of their own experience. When Katie Brown (whose great-grandfather was a Bahama-purchased Fulbe Muslim and leader of a considerable Muslim presence on Sapelo Island, Georgia) sang of seeking, for example, her song ("Believer I Know") testified to her initiate travel-authority. And it offered spiritual parentage to new seekers as they gave up something of the self in a process incorporating free wild agency into extended families of a sequestered plantation society: "The way to get to Heaven / Believer I know / Go in the wilderness / Believer I know / Fall on your bendin / Believer I know."[35]

Following ritual death and rebirth beneath living baptismal waters ("wen duh tide is goin' out so duh watuh will wash duh sins away"), congregants often celebrated in a ring shout.[36] William Francis Allen's Port Royal diary entry from 1863 offers one of the clearest early representations of the ring shout's counterclockwise movement and polyrhythmic call-and-response improvisation. Considering that "[p]erhaps it is of African origin, with Christianity engrafted upon it," Allen described how

> Billy sang or rather chanted, and the others "based" him as they say, while . . . [six dancers] moved round the room in a circle in a sort of shuffle. This is the shout. Some moved the feet backward and forward alternately, but the best shouters—and Jimmy, I was told to-day, "is a great shouter," keep the feet on the floor and work themselves along the floor by moving them right and left. It seemed tremendous work for them . . . and I saw that the most skillful ones moved very easily and quietly. The shouters seldom sing or make any noise except with their feet, but work their bodies more or less; while the singers clap their hands and stamp the right foot in time.[37]

Reworking dances honoring various African spiritual nations, and incorporating Sufi repertoires, Protestant hymns, and perhaps even elements of Creek stomp dances, the ring shout—according to historian Michael Gomez (echoing Allen's arborescent 1863 observations)—was the primary vehicle by which Christianity was "grafted onto the tree of African tradition."[38] Ring shouts like "Down to the Mire" enabled both the becoming-African of creole Christianity and the becoming-Christian of creole Africanity. Parrish's *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* contains other performative rememberings of Islamic and African prayer. We find "Knee-bone in the mornin' / Ha-ah Lord knee-bone bend," as well as shouts in Mende, and maybe even creolizations of Yoruba songs for the orisha Oshun passed down by the Georgia African Dublin Scribben: "My soul sine de *oshun*."[39] The iron orisha Ogun most likely found manifestation in the house via the overturned iron pots often placed on praise-house floors.[40]

Although disquieted whites such as Rev. Charles Colcock Jones attempted to silence and reseat Geechee worship, African embodiments of sacred authority refused to be stilled. As contemporary shouter Odessa Young explains, the shouters' steps must come into rhythmic agreement with the song's words and the beat of the "rapper's" broomstick: "If your feet can't say what the song say, you might as well not to do it. Because it ain't done right. Your feet got to say exactly what that song and stick say, and our feet got to say it exactly—if not, they're not set right."[41] A key rule was that the feet must not cross, which would result in the prohibited actions signified by the English word "dance." Shouting was clearly not "dancing," but something quite beyond English significations. Shouters integrated mind, body, and spirit in ritual swinging that has "set" much of Afro-Atlantic Protestantism's and global popular music's complex conversions.

The most conservative realm of Geechee life may lie in rites for the dead and the memorializing of ancestors—who, as in much of the diaspora, often find transitional linkage with the unborn and with children. Funeral ring shouts described by Georgia ex-slaves reveal that the shout restored behaviors from well beyond the realm of orthodox Christianity.[42] Exemplifying this conservatism is coastal Georgia resident Amelia Dawley's rendition of a funeral song identified as Mende and transcribed by Turner, recorded by Parrish, and collected from *Drums and Shadows* informant Tony Delegal in lines that fed the lyric core of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon:* "Come booba yalle, come booba tambee."[43] Work undertaken by Joseph Opala and Cynthia Schmidt facilitated the homecoming travel of Amelia Dawley's daughter Mary Moran from Georgia to Sierra Leone in 1997 to sing the family song in a Mende village with Baindu Jabati, who recalled the song from her mother's generation's now disavowed burial rites. Moran remarked, "I didn't know it was a funeral hymn . . . I used to dance to it."[44] Indeed, Liberty County's James Rogers, who sang a version of the song to Lydia Parrish in the 1930s, recalled learning it from Africans who "shouted" it in ritual ring-stepping.[45] This is how the lowcountry dead have been laid to rest, served, remembered.

The documentary film of Moran's travel to Sierra Leone (*The Language You Cry In*) portrays services of intergenerational "rescue."[46] Something of the circum-Atlantic complexity of this service appears when Moran's Georgia family and friends sing gospel in a Sierra Leone church. Moran may carry the Mende funeral song from Georgia back to Sierra Leone, but in Sierra Leone she meets not just her Mende sources but also Afro-Baptist congregations founded by David George in 1792 when he carried the gospel from Georgia to Sierra Leone.[47] According to Joseph Roach, performances such as these are important precisely because "the voices of the dead may speak freely now only through the bodies of the living," and he insists that cemeteries, historical markers, and pulpits take on a special charge "as behaviors," that is, "as occasions for memory and invention" within "an oceanic interculture."[48] Unsurprisingly then in Georgia, before entering Sapelo Island's Behavior Cemetery for the burial of her nephew, Cornelia Bailey writes, "We stopped at the old iron cemetery gate when we got there and asked the spirits for permission to enter. We have always done that over here."[49] Cemeteries such as Behavior have grounded transgenerational ties to specific spaces and times of behavior, as a South Carolina Committee on Behalf of the People insisted in 1865, demanding " 'promised Homesteads'—in terms of 'getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon.' "[50]

The Senegambian tradition of "saraka" cakes was passed down across generations on the Georgia coast. Made on key days of the Muslim calen-

dar or as a thanksgiving to the ancestors for blessings received, sweetened "saraka" cakes (from Arabic *sadaqa*, to make sacrifice, give charity) have been distributed in rites of "feeding the children" throughout West Africa's diaspora.[51] On Sapelo Island, Katie Brown spoke of her grandmother, Bilali Muhammad's Bahamian-born daughter Margaret, who "make funny flat cake she call 'saraka.' She make um same day ebry yeah, an it big day. When dey finish, she call us in, all duh chillum, an put in hands lill flat cake an we eats it . . . 'Saraka' she call um."[52] Shad Hall recalled his own grandmother's saraka: "She make strange cake, fus ub ebry munt. She call it 'saraka.' She make it out uh meal an honey. She put meal in bilin watuh an take it right out. Den she mix it wid honey, and make it in flat cakes. Sometime she make it out uh rice. Duh cake made, she call us all in an deah she hab great big fannuh full an she gib us each cake. Den we all stands roun table, and she says, 'Ameen, Ameen, Ameen,' an we all eats cake."[53] The saraka tradition that I encountered during my Peace Corps experience in Senegal faded away slowly in Georgia; however, these rites traveled to the Caribbean with Georgia slaves who chose the British offer of freedom during the War of 1812. The Georgians resettled in Trinidad where Spiritual Baptist congregants may celebrate a "saraca" or "thanksgiving," commonly known as "feeding the children," which involves setting a ritual table for the ancestors with honey, cakes, candies, flowers, etc., and offering it in the end to children of the family and neighborhood.[54] Throughout the Afro-Atlantic world we find a saraka ethos of sacrificial expenditure whereby the dead are fed and cooperative bonds of community behavior find rearticulation through ritual table-settings shared with the children (the ancestors' freshest representatives). Here is the truly functional "trickle-down" economy. The "old parents' plate" set with "all different quality of meats, chicken, pork, mutton, rice, vegetables, citrons," for "people who dead," for "everybody parents," may feed quite a global reach of creole family since humanity is "one family come from one God," as the Carriacou saraca leader, May Fortune, insisted.[55]

We hear much about isolation as a key to the lowcountry's deep African cultural substrate, but the more carefully we consider Gullah/Geechee culture in its Atlantic context, the more we may see a certain cosmopolitanism and far-reaching intercultural agency. Mass migrations from the lowcountry in 1783–84 and 1815–16 included a diverse mixture of Africans and creoles and proved foundational to Anglo-creole cultures of the Bahamas and Trinidad. We should recall the charismatic black minister George Liele's flight from Savannah in 1783, his establishment of what became the Native Baptist Church in Jamaica, its influence on the development of Revival Zion and Jamaican popular religion.[56] These movements did not emerge from a people without knowledge of rapidly changing circum-Atlantic contact zones. In their culturally foundational years, the Sea Islands were hardly isolated from the world.

The Loyalist migration at the close of the American Revolution had its greatest impact on the Bahamas, more than doubling the population of the capital, Nassau, and providing initial settlement for most of the Out Islands.[57] Bahamian islands such as Exuma and Long Island were populated largely by Georgia slaves (with strong Muslim presence), and one missionary arriving on Exuma in 1802 wrote of meeting many who "called themselves followers of Mahomet."[58] The Bahamas' first Afro-Baptist praise houses were founded in the mid-1780s by Sea Island refugees such as Samuel Scriven and Prince Williams, the latter of whom appears to have been an African with country marks.[59] Gullah/Geechee migration to the Bahamas was, in fact, so formative that creolist John Holm has described contemporary Gullah and Bahamian as "sister dialects" of an eighteenth-century Sea Island plantation creole.[60] Despite its colonial Anglicanism, the Bahamas became almost a Baptist nation, shaped by the diverse repertoires of lowcountry praise societies and their navigation of truly heterogeneous cultural conditions.

The Loyalist exodus to the Bahamas was largely a forced exodus of enslaved peoples, but the decision of slaves from the Georgia Sea Islands to side with the invading British Royal Marines during the War of 1812 (and their readiness to take up arms against U.S. troops) was a calculated risk that led to their eventual relocation as free farmers in Trinidad in 1815–16. Seven hundred eighty-one black American refugees escaped from Georgia and Virginia to find resettlement in Trinidad in the six "Meriken" Company Villages.[61] A Georgia migrant from St. Simons Island, William Hamilton, founded the first black Baptist church in Trinidad in the Fifth Company Village made up of Georgia ex-slaves (with an especially strong St. Simons contingent consisting of eighteen households supplemented by another forty-one St. Simons households in the neighboring Sixth Company Village).[62] This Geechee church, according to Trinidadian Spiritual Baptist archbishop Ahram L. Stapleton, provided foundations for one of the most cross-culturally open faiths of the Anglo-Caribbean world: the Spiritual Baptists, also known as the Shouters.[63]

Like the migrant Georgians, Trinidad's Spiritual Baptists may refer to their churches as praise houses. Spiritual Baptist praise houses also valorize an initiatory period of spiritual "travels" undertaken under the watchful eye of a ritual "pointer" in a period of vision-seeking known as "mourning," followed by the public testimony and validation of the "tract" or "track" of the mourner's travels. These "tracks" narrate journeys beneath the wonders of the sea to otherwise unaccredited transnational spiritual "schools" in Africa, India, China, or Assyria.[64] The music of services can be so ecstatic that disquieted colonial authorities banned Spiritual Baptist worship in Trinidad in the Shouters Prohibition Ordinance of 1917, and banned Baptist "Shakerism" in St. Vincent in 1912.[65] Lorna McDaniel has observed striking similarities in song texts and style shared between Spiritual Baptists and Geechee shouters,

kinships of sound she attributes to the Baptist " 'Mericans" of the Company Villages.[66] Spiritual Baptists' polyrhythmic training of mind, body, and spirit to come into agreement makes use of dreams, spirit possession, and readings of scripture; thus, Trinidadian Baptist rites "devote attention to the entire person" as the shouters "march" around the church's center pole and stamp feet to engage grounding vibrations.[67] While body, spirit, and mind need rites of synthesis to "pull together" in fully functioning ways, Spiritual Baptists organize their aesthetically rich rites and altars along a mosaic principle of spatial and temporal juxtaposition that conserves the integrity of each strand of creole ritual tradition.[68] Spiritual Baptists thus manage to be both heterodox and conservative as they juxtapose and accumulate ritual traditions from Orisha, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, and Pentecostal traditions.[69] What Trinidad's Spiritual Baptist faith suggests is that conservative religion need not be exclusionary but may be open to a consensus of diverse practices—conserving and honoring the various spirit-roots of creole peoples. Indeed, the conservative ritual openness of Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada and in early Gullah praise societies has been troubling to many "orthodox" Baptist congregations.

The Spiritual Baptists' diversely spirited worldview is evident in many members' use of saraka rites to honor the dead by feeding the children. As revealed in a narrative by the Oshún ("African power") devotee Norman Paul, "saraca" rites have been common structures of spiritual consensus in Grenada and Carriacou (often coupled with Big Drum nation dances and elements of Catholic or Baptist worship) as well as in Trinidad, where a Spiritual Baptist leader read one of Paul's dreams as a call from Oshun to "fix a table" and "feed the children" with an altar offering "sweets, cake, bread and ginger-beer" amidst nightlong song.[70] These traditions have many sources, but we should acknowledge likely migrations of saraka rites from Georgia to Trinidad. I seek here to offer a saraka in memory of Sea Island refugees willing to fight U.S. military forces for freedom and who gained a new start in the Caribbean: people like William Hamilton who founded the Baptist faith in Trinidad, and descendant Samuel Ebenezer Elliott (Papa Neezer) who received the Baptist faith of his 'Meriken ancestors and the Yoruba orisha work of his matrilineage for a life devoted to inspiriting both paths.[71] Papa Neezer's life, practices, and personae—as orthodox Baptist deacon, as Trinidad's best-known orisha house leader, and as "obeah" subject of carnival calypsos—are exemplary of the heterodox conservatism and suppleness of Afro-Atlantic performance. From such angles we may see Gullah/Geechee experience as more than an amassing of primitive survivals in splendid isolation. Here, in the soul-guardian's traveled authority, are "tracks" to a counterculture of modernity. This was a culture impoverished by chattel slavery but nevertheless far from being without means and vision to feed its children.

Steady callings to the mire and a compulsion to "see that baby" in ritual mourning brought generations through captivity and fostered extended kinships, limbo suppleness, a saraka ethos.

Amidst salt marshes and plantation landings, a spiritually mothered post–civil rights/postcolonial congregation of Afro-Atlantic writing has taken stock of its ritual repertory and reentered old mourning grounds. The travel-tracts of Georgia's Alice Walker—in essays such as "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974) and "Looking for Zora" (1975)—pointed a generation of women writers southward—back to Hurston and to unmourned "mothers and grandmothers . . . moving to music not yet written."[72] From Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), a transnational congregation answered the call to risk identification with the submerged epistemologies of seemingly dispossessed ancestors. The hybrid medleys, John Canoe exhibitions, and broken Englishes inscribed in these novel praise-housings point us toward reconsideration of Wilson Harris's "limbo imagination of the folk" and its "crucial inner recreative response to the violations of slavery . . . [which] needed its critical or historical correlative, its critical or historical advocacy."[73] For initial entry, we can follow one of the clearest and most comprehensive pointings into lowcountry/circum-Caribbean spiritual travel: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

"Somewhere a Baby Needed Changing"—*Praisesong*'s Novel Travel Tract

Praisesong for the Widow demands to be read intertextually or congregationally, within the "single calling-responsive unit" that emerges from postplantation literature, according to Valérie Loichot, when the reader works "*to foster the text*."[74] Since *Praisesong* revitalizes and enacts the "Gullah 'seeker's' initiation rite," as Elizabeth McNeil observes, the novel's travel of "[i]nitiation also involves the reader as a participant in . . . a rhetorical 'call and response' " that moves us between the Gullah Sea Islands, New York, Grenada, Carriacou, and various vessels at sea.[75] *Praisesong* opens aboard ship as we meet our avatar, the upper-middle-class, middle-aged widow, Avey (Avatara) Johnson, gathering her six suitcases after a sudden decision to abandon her cruise aboard the *Bianca Pride*. Widowed not just from her husband but also from so many others (daughters, ancestors, and lost components of self), Avey moves in both a zombie and a mourner state. She must face an unrecognized need for a different kind of travel: not a recreational getaway on the *White Pride* but the re-creative marooning of a "Runagate," as the title of the novel's first of four chapter sections underscores in pointing to Robert Hayden's poem.[76]

As Avey packs her overstuffed bags in her ship cabin, her bare feet help her recall small acts of eros and balance that once sustained her marriage:

> The 78s on the turntable in the living room: Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, The Count, The Duke. Music to usher Jay in the door. Freed of the highheels her body always felt restored to its proper axis. And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with "Cottontail" and "Lester Leaps In" would be like a rich nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn for sustenance.[77]

Starting its rescue work of realignment via barefooted stepping and a blood-red hardwood floor, *Praisesong*'s musical memory activates old habits of self-possession. Aware that she "hadn't thought of that floor for decades" (12), Avey recalls her first glance at the cruise ship's high-tech consoles and how she found "There had been no resisting it!" (15). What has been occupying her mind has been the stuff and upwardly mobile aspirations of consumer culture. Nevertheless, much as her feet activate memory, her body offers resistance—via an intense case of indigestion in the ship's opulent Versailles Dining Room. And within the three-day time frame of Christ's death and resurrection, Avey quits her cruise to mourn, shout, and open herself in saraka acts of reclaimed kinships.

As with the initiatory rites of praise-house seeking, Avey is guided by a spiritual parent and hailed by dream. In one of Avey's dreams aboard the *Bianca Pride*, her dead great-aunt Cuney comes calling her "out of her cotton-picking [mind]" to the walks they shared "during the Augusts she had spent as a girl on Tatem Island . . . on the South Carolina Tidewater" (32). Aunt Cuney steps forward as Avey's pointer to call her away from cotton-picking service to consumerism . . . via the ring shout's soul guardianship:

> Only their heels rose and then fell with each step, striking the worn pineboard with a beat that was precise and intricate as a drum's, and which as the night wore on and the Shout became more animated could be heard all over Tatem. They sang: "*Who's that riding the chariot? / Well well well . . .*"; used their hands as racing tambourines, slapped their knees and thighs and chest in dazzling syncopated rhythm. They worked their shoulders; even succeeded at times in giving a mean roll of their aged hips. They allowed their failing bodies every liberty, yet their feet never once left the floor or, worse, crossed each other in a dance step.
>
> Arms shot up, hands arched back like wings: "*Got your life in my hands / Well well well . . .*" Singing in quavering atonal voices as they glided and stamped one behind the other within the larger circle of their shadows cast by the lamplight on the walls. Even when the Spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planted firm. *I shall not be moved.* (34)

The shout works to reconcile African worship styles with Anglo-Protestant prohibition of dance and drums. As structure of both authority and freedom, the counterclockwise steps and polyrhythms of the shout enact the psychic grounding and flight signified in Avey's name, Avatara—"bird-earth"—and enable the steadiness the late Georgia shouter Lawrence McKiver observed in an accomplished holy dancer: "she could be just as level . . . Her meats'd be shakin', but she could be—so level in time."[78]

Although the shout supports *Praisesong*'s level movement and psychic flight, the object of Avey's childhood walks was Ibo Landing, where a group of chained Ibo, as the historians recount, committed suicide by leaping into the tidal river on which they were docked.[79] What Aunt Cuney imparted, however, is the marvelous witnessing of the event received from her grandmother, who spoke of the visionary gift of Africans who "could see in more ways than one" and how "when they seen what was to come" (37),

> They just turned, my gran' said . . . and walked on back down to the edge of the river here . . . They just kept walking right on out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they'd of got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on 'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round they necks like a dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. And chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibo none. Neither iron. The way my gran' tol' it . . . 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they taken off down the river on foot. Stepping. (38–39)

Providing precedent for Avey's escape from the cruise ship, this lowcountry narrative, passed from Cuney's "gran" Avatara, tests our good faith. When young Avey expressed doubts, asking, "how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?" Cuney chastised her: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?" (40). We see that the Christian miracles are accepted because they are scriptural, authorized by canonical texts, while Afro-creole encounter with the sublime faces dismissal as folkloric fantasy. The Ibo Landing tale, which Marshall reworked from the Georgia Writers' Project's interviews with ex-slaves (1940), asks us "to see in more ways than one," to nurture an ear for what John Chernoff calls a "profoundly pluralistic," polyrhythmic perspective that extends to matters of social and epistemological import.[80] As Chernoff insists, the music trains us to "expect dialogue . . . there is always an in-between, always a place to add another beat . . . beyond any one perspective a person can bring to it."[81]

If Ibo Landing is such "consecrated ground" (39) that Cuney "made the Landing her religion" (34), we may ask what consecrates it and allies it with

the "rich nurturing ground" of Avey's early marriage? Consecration comes ultimately from continued *performance* of the Ibos' refusal to bow to an authority that would consume their agency. This restored behavior allows the landing's dead to shout-step in other (godchildren's) bodies in other times, places, and media of representation.

Aunt Cuney's spirit hails Avey on the *Bianca Pride*, "exhorting her, transformed into a preacher in a Holiness church imploring the sinners and backsliders to come forward to the mercy seat. 'Come / O will you come . . . ?'" (42). Issuing a call from the grave's pulpit, Cuney demands seekerly response. And *Praisesong* builds here from African notions of personhood since Avey bears some reincarnate component of Cuney's grandmother's soul. Old Avatara, Ibo Landing's witness, had come to Cuney in a dream divining Avey's birth, gender, and name, leaving Aunt Cuney to announce, "It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl" (42). Complicating individualist notions of personhood, authorship, filiation, or salvation, *Praisesong* presents Avey as an avatar of lives that have preceded her, an avatar ritually bound to generations past and future.[82] Aunt Cuney's whirlwind charge, "like one of those August storms" over the marshes (43), forces Avey down to the mourning ground of self-eviscerating travel familiar to Gullah/Geechee and Caribbean praise-house initiates.

Avey resists furiously. However, a parfait from the *Bianca Pride*'s Versailles dining room brings on the purging indigestion described by one contemporary Caribbean Spiritual Baptist mourner as healthy rejection of a bejeweled fruit more pleasing to the eye than to the soul or the stomach: "the snake had filled Adam and Eve with a desire for that which they could not digest."[83] Initiatory transmission of knowledge in Afro-Atlantic traditions insists on multiple stagings in preparing the seeker for the rechanneling of desire. Such moments of liminal inscription face real risk. When Avey walks up to the *Bianca Pride*'s top deck, she encounters a skeet shooter. Each clay pigeon blasted to shards in its "stiff-winged trajectory" gives her a sense of the danger her avian spirit faces. When an old man in red and white trunks and blue visor reaches out to her in a pirate-zombie's skeletal dissolve of flesh and organs (58–59), readers are hailed by Uncle Sam himself. As Elizabeth McNeil has noted, Uncle Sam doubles here as a Vodou Gédé figure of the grave's ravenous ability to digest and recycle, and he steps forward as the threshold figure through whom all ritual action and cosmic dynaflow must pass.[84] When Avey finally escapes the *Bianca Pride* and arrives dockside in Grenada, the text scripts more such hailings of consumptive dispossession when Avey's Grenadian cabdriver (in Gédé's mirrored shades) responds to her request for a hotel: "'Plenty hotels, oui!' . . . 'That's all we got 'bout here now'" (80). Escaping the reaches of the *Bianca Pride* proves no easy matter in the bejeweled markets of its capitalized landings.

Ever since the novel's first critical respondent, Barbara Christian, asserted that "a visceral understanding of their history and rituals can help black people transcend their displacement," *Praisesong*'s readers have been coming to a growing awareness of how the text works to reassemble its congregational performance.[85] Black secular and sacred music, Gullah praise traditions, Spiritual Baptist mourning, nation dance, Vodou, and Orisha houses all contribute to its transnational response to historic displacements. Viscerally acute displacements drive Avey off of the *Bianca Pride* in the novel's second section of chapters, titled "Sleeper's Wake." The "Sleeper's Wake" section begins in an unlikely sacred room of mourning (a hotel) on Grenada's Grand Anse Beach where Avey is confronted with visions of her once-tender marriage dispirited by relentless focus on material progress. Awakening to her dead husband's ghostly question, "What the devil's gotten into you, woman?" (87), Avey revisits old rites of soul-guardianship whereby her husband, Jay, would shed his workday-mask and ease back into self-possession: "as if it was something apart from him, the sore spent body of a friend perhaps, he would lower his tall frame into the armchair, lean his head back, close his eyes, and let Coleman Hawkins, The Count, Lester Young (Old Prez himself), the Duke . . . work their magic, their special mojo on him. Until gradually, under their ministrations . . . his body as he sat up in the chair and stretched would look as if it belonged to him again" (94). The enthroning grooves of this royal music create a protective grove for Jay: "In his hands the worn-out album with its many leaves became a sacred object, and each record inside an icon" (94). An erotic power undergirds the "special mojo" of this music. This is an erotic that has been well described by Audre Lorde as a "power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person," a "sharing of joy" that "can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared . . . and lessens the threat of . . . difference."[86]

Polyrhythms of the creole saints do not celebrate asceticism and celibacy; they rise from spirited dialogue with the sacred source of life. Nowhere is this more clear than in Avey's mourning vision of how Jay would enter her body's "sacred room" in awestruck silence, sensing himself surrounded by living mysteries—Erzulie, Yemoja, Oya—"ancient deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife's flesh" (127). Then the marvelous lit grid, the saintly blues rhythms of her miracle coming:

> There would be the thick runaway beating of her heart ("Just the beat, just the beat of my poor heart in the dark": Lil Green on the record they loved), the heat and her dissolving limbs. And then, without warning, a nerve somewhere in her body which had never before made itself felt would give a slight twitch, and growing stronger take over the work of the pulse at her wrists and temples and throat, and begin beating. But in a more forceful way. And in a swift chain reac-

> tion—all of it taking less than a second—the upheaval would spread to a host of other nerves and muscles, causing them to erupt also. Until pulsing together they brought to life the other heart at the base of the body. And the miracle . . . took place. She slipped free of it all . . . [of] her ordinary everyday self. (128)

This gospel experience finds evangelical testimony too in blues singers' shouts and Baptist praise-house mourners' tracts. As Spiritual Baptist leader Mother Haynes asserts, "you . . . tell others about your 'tracks,' that is your story about traveling in the spirit."[87] One mourner says simply of the travel narrative she shared with praise-house members: "I shouted the good news that I had visioned . . . I was an authoritative energy."[88]

But remaining in possession of this authoritative energy requires maintenance of the infrastructural lines of erotic connection and calling-responsive communion: "The small rituals that had once shaped their lives . . . an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday . . . had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power" (137). Individualist service to Mammon leaves the "lineage," "links," and "connections" in disrepair, leading Avey and Jay (and entire communities) to consumptive states of dispossession. If Marshall's novel speaks to a black bourgeoisie's distancing from collective soul-guardianship, it also leads us to see that soul-sustaining power lines might still be accessible. This is true in the text and in the saraka rites and Spiritual Baptist churches that inform it. As Mother Samuel, a St. Vincent pointer, insists, "When you are a spiritual elder . . . you will see the lines. They look like white telephone lines. They connect you to all the places where you can travel. Sometimes I see a line that is broken: it's not lit up. I then have to go repair it to keep the connection alive."[89] Tropes of power lines, phone calls, and shining lights pervade *Praisesong* in erotic gospel figurations.

In abandoning their rituals of music and dance, along with their annual summer pilgrimage to the Carolina coast, Avey and Jay cut the lines of their shared power. And as Avey's reopening to mourning takes her back to Jay's funeral, she discovers no trace of her erotic partner, only "that other face she sometimes thought she detected hovering pale and shadowy over his," matching "the unsparing, puritanical tone that had developed in his voice" (132). Jay fell victim to the professional face he had worn only as workplace mask—and became the driven, stiffer "Jerome Johnson." Looking back into his casket from the trance-space of her Grenada hotel room, Avey sees "in the face of her great loss" (133) what she had feared to acknowledge: "she and Jerome Johnson . . . could almost pass for twins" (141). Avey Johnson, unable to think of herself as "Avey" or "Avatara," and now hailed by her own zombied corpse, has lost access to something of her deep self, the reincarnation of her ancestral witness to Ibo Landing—what Yoruba people would call her *ori* or "head." She must mourn her losses and awaken to respond to Cuney's call "at the mourner's bench" (143). One thing, however, must be kept in mind: the altar call—"*Come / Won't you come . . . ?*"—of "Sleeper's Wake" (143) is not simply for Avey, who is, after all, only an avatar for the text's readerly experience.

Praisesong's third section—"Lavé Tête," opening with an epigraph of pointsong (Vodou praise song) to the path-clearing crossroads deity, Legba—moves toward "head-washing" whereby Avey is prepared to receive the *lwa* (mystery or guardian of soul) planted within her head. First she must smell her own stink, and history's too. The "Lavé Tête" head-washing section commences with Avey as both mother and infant: "In the final turn of her sleep she smelled it. An odor faint but familiar. Somewhere a baby needed changing" (149). Of course, as praise-house pointers would insist, "the baby is your soul." Awakened to "the staleness of her own flesh" (150), Avey leaves her hotel room for a beach stroll, "clumsy as a two-year-old" (151). She feels "the caul over her mind lifting" (154) before the sun sends her to shelter in a rum shop tended by an old man from the Out Island of Carriacou. Here, Lebert Joseph, an agile but limping "old man with one leg shorter than the other" (160), an avatar of Papa Legba (the Vodou path-opener), takes on the role of Avey's pointer "[a]s if she were a schoolgirl again and he a teacher she disliked" (161). He speaks of the weekend's Carriacou "excursion" and explains the need for remembrance of the "Old Parents," who may "get vex and cause you nothing but trouble" if not honored in the Big Drum's nation dances and assuaged with the Beg Pardon dance (165). In stating "I's a Chamba!" and asking, "What's your nation?" (166–67), he deterritorializes Avey's accustomed boundaries of identity. Mystified, she nevertheless relates her dream of Aunt Cuney, and Lebert realizes Avey is one of those vexed subjects "who can't call their nation" (175).

Although Avey recognizes only one of Lebert's dance demonstrations (not a nation dance but the creole Juba dance she knows from Carolina), she watches him perform another creole dance most poignantly: the Bongo. When he "of the mismatched legs" (178) performs the Bongo for her, "it didn't seem that the story was just something he had heard, but an event he had been witness to," the song's enslaved parents enchained and sold off to different islands, the song's children "left orphaned behind" (177). Such danced, embodied mourning fosters remediating responses to the traumas of diasporic orphaning. In the contemporary Caribbean, we see this remediation take form in Baptist rites of "adoption." Spiritual Baptist Mother Superior Sandy advises her initiates to "[m]ove when the spirit adopts you."[90] According to St. Vincent's Mother Samuel, "'Doption is when the spirit gets

into your belly. When you feel it making your body tight, you must stand up and stomp the ground. Then let it come out of your mouth."[91] She explains how a tutelary spirit adopted her and showed her "how the stomping of the feet and the shaking of the earth sent a pumping spiritual energy into the belly."[92] In Grenada, Avey recalls her own childhood experiences of antiphonal adoption—a Tatem Island ring shout and a Harlem boat excursion up the Hudson—and how she felt "what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her" (190), till suddenly it would seem that "the threads didn't come from her, but from them . . . issuing out of their navels and hearts to stream into her" (191). This memory of adoption's erotic threads or power grid marks Avey's final preparation for her unanticipated travel on the Carriacou excursion.

Avey goes back to the docks that very afternoon, boarding a Carriacou sloop with Lebert Joseph, who opens "a swift path for them" (192). Once aboard the packed boat, she sits amidst women so much like "the presiding mothers" who brought "sinners and backsliders . . . [through] their shamefaced calvary up to the pulpit" of her childhood church (194) that she gets transported to a childhood Easter sermon, "Affrighted and filled with wond-a-a-h!" (199). As Avey's waterborne vision fills with the Holy Ghost power of that old Easter sermon, which can "roll away the stones sealing up our spirits" (200), the minister's remembered voice becomes supplemented with the power-flow (or *ashé*) of "saints" like Shango, fiery orisha of electric storm, establishing electric lines by which "*Jesus called and God acted*" (201), as Avey travels back into that Easter Sunday's intoned launching of "This little light of m-i-n-e" (202). The preacher's summons—"*Just call Him*," "*Call Him in the midnight hour*"—evokes "*the thrilling response*" of a fully lit congregational assemblage: "*Call Him*" (202). The restored powerlines of that childhood Easter, twinned to the boat's turbulent sea-passage, have Avey vomiting in seasick voidings and in purgings of a deeply lodged indigestible "*chocolate Easter egg*" from childhood (203). Here is the over-rich unincorporable gift-egg given to the failed initiate girl in the narratives that charted our introduction. Tended by the "mothers" on "the bench" of the schooner (204), the infantilized Avey finally shits herself in a detoxifying release of "the stench" (205) common to Afro-creole initiatory rebirthings, which often use herbal emetics and laxatives in production of the freely flowing body without organs, realized for Deleuze and Guattari, we may recall, in the Dogon cosmic egg's distribution of intensities.[93]

This ritual evisceration moves Avey into the limbo of what Gay Wilentz termed a "Middle Passage back" across the Atlantic.[94] It also repeats a harrowing vision described by a Spiritual Baptist mourner who experienced "spiritual surgery" in the sacred room of his travel: "All my inner organs and

tissue were scraped out and then washed with a small fire hose. I was completely emptied. They poured salt inside me and sewed me up."[95] To travel or mourn is to enter a gutting of individual agency that paradoxically works to open the initiate to energy flows (grace, *ashé*) of potentiality via travel through abject mires—shit, bile, undigested matter, the sacrificial blood of animal surrogates. If flow is blocked, Legba/Lebert can clear a path through stagnation, as he does for Avey down to the deckhouse where, though she is left alone, a "multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was" (208). Afro-creole initiations often revisit these limbo-mires of Middle Passage. Métraux describes how the Vodou *laver-tête* ceremony calls supplicants to have their heads washed and then bound with a shampoo of herbs, syrup, milk-soaked starches, and blood, challenging them with an itchy, decomposing stench throughout their lengthy retreat to aid their own passage's adoptive purpose: to instantiate the link between initiate and *lwa*.[96]

Praisesong's final section, "The Beg Pardon," opens with an exhausted Avey, bathed and massaged by Lebert's daughter, finding the saraka offering of lit candle and corn set on a side table for the ancestors "no more strange than the plate of food that used to be placed beside the coffin at funerals in Tatem" (225). She meets Lebert that evening by the crossroads to attend the Big Drum rite, and at the gate Lebert again manifests as the path-opening *lwa* Legba: "his body more misshapen and infirm than ever before" (233). Leading Avey to a rum-wet clearing where the "long-time folk" gather, Lebert soon falls to his knees, calling the "Old Parents" with a falsetto "*Pa'doné mwê . . .*!" (236).

After the "Beg Pardon," the nation dances call those who identify themselves by performance of African "nation" (Cromanti, Manding, Congo, etc.). When the creole dances begin with fresh drum-mistings of rum, an iron gong summons "Ogun Feraille" (246), iron deity of metallurgic creative/destructive cycles. With Ogun's "[i]ron lending its authoritative voice" (242), Avey watches the dancers' "ever-widening ring" till "the reverberation of their powerful tread in the ground" brings her to take "a single declarative step forward" (247). Moving "cautiously at first, each foot edging forward as if the ground under her was really water—muddy river water" (248), Avey rejoins the Ibo stepping across the waters back home: "She had finally after all these decades made it across" (248). Making it across means tapping into structures outside the self—as "she felt the threads" (249)—those power lines of connection with other people, places, times. Moving now toward flight, "working her shoulders in the way the Shouters long ago used to do, thrusting them forward and then back in a strong casting-off motion" (249), Avey steps a "shuffle designed to stay the course of history," till suddenly her "arms went up and her body seemed about to soar off into the night" (250).

It is at this point that Lebert drops the proud glow of spiritual parentage and bows low, followed by the other older dancers prostrating themselves, one by one, to some awesome manifestation from the Old Parents incarnate in Avey's dance. When a bearded woman, a "Tiresias of the dried dugs," bows and asks, "And who you is?" Avey replies, as Aunt Cuney had insisted, "Avey, short for Avatara" (251). Finally, she has made it across to becoming avatar of her own reclaimed head (*ori*): both that reincarnate transgenerational spirit which makes the prenatal choices of destiny we may work to maximize, and the orisha or "head-source (ori-sha)" that is a guardian-source of this consciousness.[97]

Avey's travel to restored behaviors of *orisha* consciousness finds fullest vetting in the final recognition scene between the dancing Avatara and the bearded woman, a scene that reincarnates masks from Yoruba Gelede and Efe spectacle. Practiced in Nigeria's Yoruba communities, Gelede pays homage to transformational powers of the Mothers. Gelede's nighttime component, Efe, begins with *ijuba* incantations—activating personal and relational potentiality—followed by praises to the path-opening deities Eshu-Elegba and Ogun, then songs of social commentary, and finally the appearance of ancestral mother-masks, embodying powers of shape-shifting and becoming.[98] These masks "dramatize the spiritual side of womanhood in two of its aspects—a bearded crone, often called the Great Mother (Iyanla), and Spirit Bird (Eye Oro)."[99] Women's birthing powers and their relatively open access to the "head" allow the mothers a share in the primary Yoruba emblem of the spirit: the ever-reincarnate spirit-head (*ori*) or white "bird of the head" that enters each physical head at birth.[100] When these bodies of knowledge migrated to the New World, they met virgin saints and the white dove of annunciation. In Carriacou, the "Big Drum" rite reaches Avey with such deep affect that—upon being recognized with a bow from the bearded mother—she introduces herself as Avatara (both avian and of *terra firma*), avatar of an ancestor who bears witness to the Ibo hierophany.

As Avey goes to the mire, makes it across, and becomes avatar of "the Longtime folk," the Big Drum moves her to mourn transgressions against her "spirit-head." She begs pardon for her submission to consumer materialism and for her subsequent shirking of an elder's responsibilities. Facing this disorganization of personal and community energy flow, Avey reaches, in Baptist terms, salvation. Augmenting Avey's ancestral restoration is the potential renovation and conversion of the Tatem Island church itself, which "looked as if it had never recovered from the blow dealt its authority one evening long ago when Avey's great-aunt had raged out of its door never to return" (33). *Praisesong* anticipates Cornel West's 1993 call for "some kind of *politics of conversion*," working locally, within "those institutions in civil society still vital enough" to counter the nihilism of an "ever-expanding market culture that puts everything and everyone up for sale."[101] West grounded his appeal for conversion in a "love ethic," a kind of lapsed saraka ethos that he found exemplified in fiction, especially in Marshall's and Toni Morrison's novel "tracks."[102]

"To dare transition," that is the achievement of *Praisesong for the Widow*. It undertakes a politics of conversion and transfiguration in its remodeling of Afro-Atlantic assemblages. A restored Avatara leaves Carriacou vowing to repair the family house in the Sea Islands to host her grandchildren each summer in the manner in which Aunt Cuney pointed her. Advancing an Afro-conservative politics of conversion, she will convert the house into a summer camp, inviting her daughter's schoolchildren too—those "sweetest lepers" of the poor—to travel Ibo Landing's "consecrated ground." In *Praisesong*, the novel functions as assembly house of old rites that begin to find a new social legitimization through the very print networks that had steadily dismissed black Atlantic religion as an "undefinable medley of truth and falsehood." Marshall's praise-novel performs a remarkable redefinition-and-conversion medley on reclaimed terrain.

~ end ~

Transfiguring Conversions—"Lower lower . . . down to de mire"

Recent novels set in creolized postplantation spaces return us to a saraka ethos and the travels of mourning on trauma-consecrated ground. In *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John McClure points to a widespread seekerly impulse in American fiction. McClure utilizes Robert Wuthnow's description of two modes of contemporary religious orientation, "dwelling" and "seeking," and charts a postsecular turn in North American fiction in texts in which "religiously unhoused spiritual seekers" enact "practices of open dwelling that have not closed the door to otherness."[103] Nevertheless, as McClure admits, apprehensions of spiritual homelessness are hardly new to the Americas or to transatlantic plantation economies. Afro-creole praise societies faced incredible challenges of fostering community via occluded modes of resistance to white-supremacist fundamentalisms. McClure's *Partial Faiths* rightly insists, however, that even these hard-won Afro-creole housings find healthy contestation in the work of contemporary writers who "project a spiritually charged cosmos" while seeking to avoid "turning this cosmic house of the spirits into a prison house of religious dogma."[104] Speaking of how Toni Morrison's "power as a postsecular novelist arises in part from her culturally sponsored investment in a spacious, creolized spirituality," McClure adds that "it rises as well . . . from her culturally grounded knowledge of the dangers of religious enclosure."[105] What gets fashioned in texts like *Praisesong* is the housing of another kind of authority—out of subalternized, discredited, and just plain dissed sources—