[8]Amiri Baraka, "leroy," *Collected Poetry by LeRoi Jones* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) quoted in *Praisesong for the Widow* in the epigram to Part One, "Runagate."

Critique

In her discussion of Mattie Michael and Avey Johnson as mentors in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Wells uses as a focal point Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "What Shall I Give My Children?" It is a socially and politically institutionalized assignment that becomes cosmic when experienced by African American women. Joanne M. Braxton expresses it: "As Black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness. . . . "[1] Wells quotes Toni Morrison regarding the black woman: "She has nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of her reality, she may well have invented herself." And she invented a self that shaped her identity within the constrictions of a hostile network that wove a tapestry of bonding, the foundation of becoming a mentor, or providing "ancestral presence" to borrow phrases from Braxton, in the image of "the outraged mother." The roles of mentors and bonding are survival mechanisms, spiritually and physically.

Harry B. Shaw, categorizing Brooks's poetry, placed "What Shall I Give My Children?" under the heading "The Labyrinth--111 Surviving in the Labyrinth"[2] and states:

> Miss Brooks's poetry depicts an elaborate system . . . or labyrinth, . . . characterized by myriad pitfalls, dead ends, endless wrong choices and other hazards, and the poet refers figuratively to it as "the way back home or Mecca," or alludes to a spiritual return to Africa which is consistently depicted as the embodiment of the original dignity and freedom for the black man. It is the tortuous road that lies between spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. . . .[3]

Wells describes Mattie Michael as the "moral agent" in *The Women of Brewster Place*, representing "the voice of charity and sensitivity, a woman whose suffering has not made her bitter

and competitive, but rather strong and supportive. . . . The consciousness she possesses at the opening of the novel is a fortitude/painbought, the product of much anguish at the hands of her lover, her father, and her son." This reader agrees with Wells, and it is the reader's opinion that capturing the portrait of both Mattie Michael and Avey Johnson could be enhanced by discussing literary devices that Naylor and Marshall employed to solidify and fix their characters as mentors. Such discussions could also provide an avenue for further research.

Mattie "is the product of much anguish at the hands of her lover, her father, and her son"; this statement describes her beginning in a Lapsarian setting. She is allegorically and symbolically presented as the innocent Black Eve, in a pastoral atmosphere, a Garden-of-Eden paradise, Arcadia of sugar cane (representing the sweetness of the apple) and herbs. Mattie is under the protection of her father who warns her of Butch Fuller (the "snake" who offers the apple), just as God warned Eve of temptation. Challenging Mattie's staunch adherence to her father's warning, Butch cajoles, "Why, well, just as I was saying. . . . A big woman like you ain't got no cause to be scared of what her daddy might say. . . ." Butch tells her how to taste the sugar cane to get the maximum sweetness: " . . . 'try it the way I told you.' And she did."[4] Just as Eve encountered the wrath of God and was banished from Eden, Mattie faced her father's rage, an anger so great that it forced Mattie to abandon her "garden." Not even her mother's support could prevent Mattie's exile. Another penalty Eve paid was bearing children; Mattie has a son whom she named Basil, one of the herbs in her former "garden." Like Cain in *Genesis*, Basil becomes a murderer (involuntary manslaughter).[5] He also destroys his mother's hopes and dreams for him, as well as her independent future when he jumps bail causing Mattie to lose the house she purchased from her mentor Eva Turner and occupied for thirty years. She must now go even farther east of Eden. Arriving at Brewster Place, Mattie symbolized displaced Eves through the centuries, specifically the Black Eve, with "nothing to fall back on," and a victim of "myriad pitfalls, dead ends, and endless wrong choices." However, as Wells states, her "suffering has not made her bitter and competitive" and "she becomes the voice of charity and sensitivity."

Wells quotes Naylor: "It was exorcising the evilness of pain." At this point there is also another Biblical image of Mattie as she totally transcends banishment and symbolically is the Black Madonna, a child in her arms, a holy guide and teacher with the forgiving and understanding nature of a

Madonna. Mattie executes "laying on of the hands," and like the Saint, she has power to heal. To her lost sheep, her lambs who strayed in the labyrinth, Mattie gives hope, love, salvation, and spiritual rejuvenation.

There are other vestiges of Biblical references that may invite investigation: Eva Turner bears a name which is a variation of Eve, the earth mother, referring to life. In Etta Johnson's commanding the attention of the Reverend Woods by adorning her finery and attending church with Mattie, there is a suggestion of Bathsheba's bathing on the roof so that King David might notice her, or of Ruth's gleaning in the fields with Naomi and lying at the feet of Boaz to gain attention. Unlike the Biblical characters, Etta failed because the Reverend Woods did not share her dream.

Since the role of mentors may be reinforced by the names they bear, a serious student might examine appellations that help define Mattie and some of the other "women whose voices reverberate throughout the novel." Analyze Eva Turner's surname TURN-Her. She literally turned Mattie's life around. As for Etta Johnson, Etta is derived from Henrietta, the feminine form of Henry. Henry refers to "ruler of an enclosure, home ruler," Johnson, son of John, John meaning "the Lord is gracious." Mattie, a diminutive of Matilda or Mathilda, means "powerful," and Michael, "who is like God."

Regarding Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Wells supports her discourse with a comment from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: "Gates argues that when blacks accept white values, they do it at the expense of their own identity and selfworth."

After Avey abandons the cruise, goes on the excursion to the island Carriacou, listens to the drums and music, and joins the dancing, all of African origin, she travels farther along the path to spiritual discovery: She will counsel children, and become mentor to all whom she meets. Her retirement will become "RE-*TIER*-MENT," the ascension of a black middle-aged, middle-class woman whose mission will be to spread vestiges of African heritage. Taking upon herself to "speak of the excursion to others elsewhere, her territory would be the street corners . . . front lawns . . . of North White Plains . . . shopping malls. . . ."[6] Avey continues planning to tell the story that has been drilled into her as a child, which had been handed down from the woman whose name she bore. Her ancestors, the Ibos, had walked across the water back to Africa. And they had "all that iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round they necks. . . . But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. . . . Her

[Aunt Cuney] body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind was long gone with the Ibos. . . ."[7]

The roles of mentors may be reinforced by the inclusion of literary devices that solidify and fix personages, as well as provide avenues for additional research. Walking on the water, a defiance of the law of physics, may be discussed as the spiritual refusal to be bound by bondage; it is preserving history of a proud defiant people respecting their own native land. Further research will unearth other examples of knowledge about Africa that was handed down from one generation to the next by Africans in the New World. This knowledge became a part of folk thought and was incorporated in literary work. A portion of it revealed Africans challenging and protesting enforced transplantation. For example, in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: "Some of those they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa."[8] The speaker feels the "ancestral presence" so keenly that he asserts: " . . . He flew baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home. . . . He tried to take his baby boy with him . . . my great-granddaddy could flyyyyy. . . . Tell him my great-granddaddy could fly."[9]

The name Avatara defines, not only Avey but also the mentor for whom she was named. Avatara comes from the word *avatar*, a god in Hindu mythology representing reincarnation. The English translation refers to "a god's coming to earth; and embodiment." Avatara also reinforces the four themes attributed to Marshall's fiction: the identity crisis, the importance of tradition for black Americans, the race problem, and the need to share in order to foster meaningful relationships.[10] In addition, Abena P. A. Busia informs readers:

> The name, therefore, which has at its root a word meaning a passing over or a human manifestation of a continuing concept or entity, is of great symbolic importance.[11]

Associating Avey, as her name implies, with god-like qualities, Busia discusses the significance of her meeting Lebert Joseph, who performs the role of the deity Legba. In Ewe religion, he is the god of households and thresholds; he is also the Yoruba god of crossroads, who is the messenger of the gods. As for Afro-Caribbean practice, Legba is the lame god of the crossroads.[12]

Considering the importance of the title *Praisesong for the Widow* to Avey as mentor, Busia offers the following assessment:

> These gestures of significance that need to be registered begin, even before the first word of the

> novel has been read, with the words of the title, *Praisesong for the Widow*. For Africans, a praisesong is a particular kind of heroic poem. Sung in various communities over the entire continent, praisesongs embrace history, myths, and legends of a whole people. . . . Important for its use here, they can also be sung to mark social transition.[13]

Not restricting defining characters by implication of their names, Marshall placed Avey on the cruiser *Bianca Pride*--white pride. She lives in North White Plains. Sabine Brock observes: "[Marshall] sets out to send her heroine on a successful search for an alternative, after having imaged for us, in an emphatic, precise close-up, the violation suffered in middle-class sites like *North White Plains*, in itself *a name that is almost too metaphorical.*[14] (Italics added)

Supporting Wells's commentary, Eugenia Collier comments, " . . . what Avey discovered and left to tell all who would listen--*especially the children.* The people with no sense of community were the losers."[15] (Italics added) In addition, John McClusky describes the dance: "It is a dance which defines Avey as a member of a vast family and clarifies not only her present identity but her future as *myth extended.*"[16] (Italics added)

Wells presented the response to the question "What Shall I Give My Children?" by defining the giving that Mattie Michael and Avey Johnson provided as mentors, gifts of the substance which create and sustain the spirit, contributing to black survival, especially black female survival. This survival encompasses historical memories, "genetic" in origin that command respect and fortify self-worth. "Genetic memories" are illusive, as illustrated by Avey Johnson, but may be summoned by the sound of an African drum, an African chant, recalling a story of slaves landing who could see what ordinary people could not see. Thus they crossed the ocean by foot and returned to their land, leaving descendants, such as Avey Johnson, whose bodies remain in Tatem, but whose souls were gone with the Ibos. The feeling may emerge, as it did with Mattie Michael, when women share their common state of femaleness, blackness, and alienation.

Linda Wells's analysis is supported by the literary devices that authors Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall used to further define and solidify Mattie Michael and Avey Johnson, and supporting characters, as mentors.

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[1]Joanne M. Braxton, "Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing," in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 299.

[2]Harry B. Shaw, *Gwendolyn Brooks* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 106.

[3]Shaw, 94.

[4]Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 18.

[5]Naylor, 46.

[6]Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), 255.

[7]Marshall, 255.

[8]Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 322.

[9]Morrison, 328.

[10]Loola Kapai, "Dominant Themes and Techniques in Paule Marshall's Fiction," *CLA Journal* 16 (September 1972): 49-71.

[11]Abena P. A. Busia, "What Is Your Nation?: Reconstructing Africa and Her Diaspora Through Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," in *Changing Our Own Words*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 210.

[12]Busia, 204.

[13]Busia, 198.

[14]Sabine Brock, "Transcending the Loophole of Retreat: Paule Marshall's Placing of Female Generation," *Callaloo* #30, 10,1 (Winter 1987): 88.

[15]Eugenia Collier, "The Closing of the Circle Movement from Division to Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 296.

[16]John McClusky, Jr., "And Called Every Generation Blessed: Theme, Setting, and Ritual in the Works of Paule Marshall," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) 333.

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