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# Dressing psychic wounds: Clothing as metaphor in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the widow and Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony

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Dressing Psychic Wounds: Clothing as Metaphor in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong  
for the Widow* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Dressing Psychic Wounds: The Metaphor of Clothing in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Angela D. Tartaglia

ABSTRACT

I investigate the function of dress as it relates to cultural retention in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, drawing upon the work of fashion theorists Joanne Entwistle, Alison Lurie and Anne Hollander. My examination of the two novels is informed by several excellent scholarly works which hold that characters' well being is determined by the extent to which they connect with their folkloric roots, the central message in both *Ceremony* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. I build on this discourse by demonstrating that the novels' consistent attention to clothing is a device that situates characters psychologically in their spiritual journeys homeward, from fragmented self identity to incorporeal contentment. My investigation of the unique treatment of clothing and adornment as metaphor for the novels' crises finds that the images of dress in characters' internal and external worlds heightens the conflict and illustrates the resolution in both novels.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Of notable similarities shared by Afro Caribbean and Native American literature, the strongest common theme, folklore, often concerns reconciliation with cultural heritage. Excellent scholarly work has explored the psychic fragmentation that occurs when Avey Johnson, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* abandons cultural ties that once sustained her. Similarly, critical scholarship analyzes the cultural identity crisis suffered by Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. I extend the discourse on this subject by examining the trope of clothing and adornment in both novels and revealing its significance to the spiritual journeys of Avey and Tayo, who use clothing variously as a cloak for their states of mind and as a display of hard won status. As a metaphor, it builds a visual and consistent pattern that underlines the crises and resolutions of the characters. In *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Ceremony*, the language of dress conveys and supports the story of cultural regeneration.

Much of the literary discourse on the novels has focused on the characters' experiences as either emotional breakdown or insightful logic. An exploration of the relationship between wounded psyche and sartorial body provides strong evidence for both of these perspectives. In the strong focus on internal struggles, images of dress emphasize the psychological effects of cultural disconnection. Its prominent appearance in dreams, memories and hallucinations guides the characters back to the sources of

tradition that heals their minds and spirits. Adornment of the body works alongside both novels' major themes of community and folklore to communicate the overall message that spiritual renewal is possible through an embrace of cultural beginnings.

While theorists differ on the functions of dress in society, Kate Soper's observations about social motivations for dress is a basic point of agreement; dress is primarily an "other-directed" activity, its purpose being either to discreetly deflect attention or to become the center of it (18). With this fundamental premise, many theorists also see dress as a system of communication, and their perspectives on this intersect in interesting ways. Roland Barthes, for instance, was one of the first to suggest dress as a language; theorist Allison Lurie expands this notion by exploring its "vocabulary and grammar" (Lurie 16). Joanne Entwistle, who sees much potential for the study of dress, cites Fred Davis, who disagrees entirely with the language analogy, holding that the meanings of clothing are "... ambiguous and imprecise. Their real power is in their ability to suggest, evoke and resist meaning. They are not as clear or precise as verbal language, but more like a code" ("Fashioned" 67).

The encoded images of clothing in Avey's and Tayo's psychological processes form an instructional message. "Other-directed" dress in *Praisesong* and *Ceremony* tends toward extreme displays of deflecting or gaining attention; it is alternately a mesmerizing performance of power and an attempt at seamless uniformity. When Avey and Tayo are attuned to these inner messages, they recognize the trickery that the images symbolize. Detached from their own cultures, both characters have masked their pain by blending in with Western culture to the point of near invisibility. With these dreams and visions, both

Avey and Tayo have the guidance of their ancestors to warn them of the dangers of participating in these behaviors. I demonstrate the pattern that Marshall and Silko devise to reconcile their characters to their pasts.

Anne Hollander's argument about dress resonates well with the themes of both texts: "Because of their complex visual situation, clothes ... cannot really be compared, as they often are, to kinds of verbal behavior such as as ... speech, exclamation, or bursts of rhetoric ... " (xv) Instead, Hollander suggests, they are " ... like conventional expressions in a literary form, of which the canonical examples have been assimilated by the reading public" (xv). The literary form that dress most resembles in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Ceremony* is myth. Myth figures greatly as one of the several ways the authors employ folklore in the novels; characters remember and draw upon the strength of the stories that have been passed down through the generations. Much in the same way, they create myth in their dress, especially the uniform, and perpetuate the myths by exchanging stories about them. In both novels, the characters who survive with their self esteem intact are those who are best able to discern the messages behind the myths.

## Chapter Two

### Traveling Light: Guidance from Ancestors in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

Paule Marshall's fiction often centers on journeys, both physical and symbolic, of spiritual reawakening experienced by female protagonists who reconnect with their Afro-Caribbean ancestral foundations. Her work underlines the importance of maintaining traditional values within the framework of Western social mores of self made success. Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* emblemizes this theme, creating, in Jerome and Avey Johnson, a struggle between the sustainment of folk ritual and the security of financial success. The resulting disconnection between Avey's physical state and her spiritual needs are an example of what Joyce Pettis sees as a fractured psyche, which she argues " ... affects identity and threatens psychic survival unless it is repaired" ("Wholeness" 11).

Conversely, Barbara Christian views Avey's behavior as a coping mechanism. To Christian, mind and body separation in *Praisesong* " ... personalizes the oldest of Afro American stories," recalling African slaves who survived spiritually through their psychological connection to Africa, even as their physical beings remained enslaved (76). Christian identifies within the structure of the novel a motif that shows Marshall's logic in presenting Avey as a woman divided in body and mind:

... Marshall develops Avey Avatara Johnson's journey to wholeness by juxtaposing external reality with memory, dream, hallucination—

disjointed states of mind—in which the past and the present fuse. And Marshall uses these internal elements to guide Avey back to external reality and back to earth. The recurrent motif for the novel, that the body might be in one place and the mind in another, is characterized not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom, stemming from a history of the forced displacement of blacks in the West (75).

Marshall symbolizes Avey's sense of enslavement through Avey's strong emotional attachment and sense of identification to her wardrobe. As an upper class woman, her properly clothed and adorned appearance becomes a subconscious safeguard against the entrapment she often felt as a young mother in the Johnsons' cramped and shoddy Halsey Street apartment. Yet the constraints of maintaining her status imprison her as well. In "Runagate," the widow Avey begins her slow realization that she has lost sight of the real source of contentment in her life.

As Avey prepares for her cruise, her daughter Marion pointedly asks: "Why would anyone in their right mind need to take this much stuff just to go away for a couple of weeks?" (13). Avey, in her overly zealous packing, indeed raises questions about her state of mind, communicating her emotional state of crisis to her perceptive daughter in an example of Silverman's observation that dress, in " ... articulating the body, ... simultaneously articulates the psyche" (147). Her decision to leave the cruise ship is made more taxing by the re-packing of her many ensemble dresses and evening gowns. The clothes are a physical burden: "The back pain she suffered with occasionally was threatening to flare up with all the bending and hauling" (10). Marion's rhetorical

question, in response to the subconscious message symbolized by her mother's abundant wardrobe, hints to Avey that her mental state is imbalanced.

Christian's analysis proposes Avey's mind's temporary flight from its sense of enslavement as a preservation, rather than an indication of sanity. An important element of these internal experiences is the guidance of Avey's spiritual mentors through her dreams and visions. Toni Morrison explains the role of ancestor figures in African American literature, who keep characters rooted to their heritage; they are "not just parents, they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (62). In some novels, such as Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, protagonists are guided by elders or by ancient spirits. Interestingly, Sandra Pouchet Paquet examines characters in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who occupy dual roles within the novels as both ancestral figures who possess all of the nurturing traits Morrison describes, and as young lovers and husbands to those whom they mentor. Early in their marriage, Jay's relationship with Avey is an example of this unconventional ancestor type.

As a widow, reconnection to memories of Jay's folk rituals are an important part of Avey's self actualization. Memories of these rituals have been long submerged in other, less pleasant memories of the strife that soon develops between the Johnsons when Avey's unexpected pregnancy, along with increased workplace oppression from Jay's racist employer, places the family at risk of falling even further into economic hardship. Jay reacts to this crisis with an obsessive pursuit of financial security for the family.

Although their North White Plains home signifies his abundant success in this endeavor, pressures associated with material acquisition exact a spiritual toll on the couple. Both Jay and Avey suffer identity crises; with the new persona of his formal name, "Jerome," Jay adopts an unsympathetic attitude towards those who struggle as he once did, while Avey's stress manifests itself in her excessive concern with her appearance. bell hooks explains the couple's behavior thus:

A culture of domination demands of all of its citizens self-negation. The more marginalized, the more intense the demand. Since black people, especially the underclass, are bombarded by messages that we have no value, are worthless, it is no wonder that we fall victim to nihilistic despair or forms of addiction that provide momentary escape, illusions of grandeur, and temporary freedom from the pain of facing reality. (19)

Underlying the Johnsons' bizarre behavior is the fear that, should their masks slip, they risk falling into financial oblivion. Yet, as Morrison emphasizes, characters who hope to gain success without staying grounded to their cultural values lose something far more important; she argues that "When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself" (62). Self sufficiency, though an admirable trait, must be accompanied by a sense of strong familial bonds and communalism; according to Morrison, " ... nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (64). Marshall's Jay and Avey Johnson embody the types of characters Morrison has in mind, whose sense of self succumbs to a misplaced value system. Realizing this mistake after Jay's death, Avey cannot amend the choices that she and Jay made, but her memories of both their

enjoyable moments together and their mistakes is important to her future self development.

Focusing on Avey's slowly emerging memories of Halsey Street, Marshall emphasizes roles in which Avey has been content in the past. Halsey Street contains memories of both spontaneous and ritualistic observance of folk tradition that are crucial to Avey's personal growth. As Christian points out, Marshall's portrayal of the significance of Halsey Street is complex:

She is able to maintain, in her narrative a tension between black people's need to survive and develop in America, and their even more important need to sustain themselves. ... Marshall does not present these two elements of black life as mutually exclusive; rather she shows how complex and interrelated they are. (78)

In the early days on Halsey Street, the Johnson family is spiritually content, in spite of their physically debilitating substandard housing. Jay's embodiment of Afro-Caribbean culture is the source of their contentment. Avey remembers the cultural pride that Jay nurtured in his family through his evening routines of reciting Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. He leaves behind the carefully maintained public persona necessary for survival in the racist system in which he works, and becomes the husband who performs spontaneous dances in the living room to his treasured music albums. The jazz and blues records "work their magic" on Jay, transforming his features until his body "look[s] as if it belong[s] to him again" (94). At work, Jay is an enslaved corporeal entity, but the implied magic of the music sets him free. These laughter filled moments counter

balance Avey's concerns about the effects of the poorly heated apartment on her daughters' health and her witnessing of police brutality in the neighborhood.

Marshall delivers a powerful image of sexuality and bodily adornment to illustrate Jay's uplifting effect on Avey's self perception during their early years in the small apartment. Of her memories of Jay, Avey treasures their intimacy as a couple most. Jay's high esteem of Avey's sexuality is "another kind of poetry," (127) a connection with their shared Diasporic heritage through physical touch that transcends them both from their meager surroundings. Entwistle claims that " ... jewelry and adornment do much more than just reflect the pre-sexed body; they embellish the body, infuse it with sexuality" (181). Jay's powerful visions of Avey with erotic adornments become real for both of them. Avey recalls Jay "[t]alking that talk until he turned her into a wanton with her nightgown bunched up around her like an airy boa she had donned to feed his sexual pleasure ... " (127).

The Johnsons' sexual experiences imagine Avey's body embellished with the powers of ancient goddesses; Jay would " ... lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple ... , sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there: Erzulie with her jewels and gossamer veils, ... " (127). These memories contrast with Avey's confused self image as a widow and suggest the agency and power that has always existed within her when she embraces her heritage. To Jay, " ... her behind was Gulla gold!" (126). Erzulie, the Haitian goddess of lust and love, known for her lovely clothes and adornment (Green 49) is a fitting comparison for Avey in Jay's image of her; he respects her sexual power over him. This highly valued role in Avey's

memory forms a more complete story of who she is, past and present, in addition to her current role as the proper suburban socialite.

The image of a slovenly dressed woman often seen on Halsey Street serves at first as a talisman of optimism for the couple but later as the climactic scene that permanently changes the Johnsons' way of life. The woman's regular tirades in her nightgown against her carousing husband are the subject of jokes between the Johnsons; yet she is also the frightening specter of the spiritual bankruptcy they struggle to avoid. Roving the local taverns in her nightgown in search of her drunken and wasteful husband, it is not her place on a lower financial stratum than the Johnsons that is most frightening, but her lack of the kind of spiritual connection shared by the Johnsons. To Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, even the jokes that Avey and her husband share with each other are grounded in folklore. These jokes, the critical author claims, are a form of conjure against the threat that the woman represents to the Johnson family's carefully nurtured sense of well being:

Like 'juju powders,' the jokes protect, ritualizing Jay's and Avey's hope and confidence. Marshall's comparison of the jokes to 'Five Finger Grass,' however, does more than ritualize optimism. Referenced in Miles and Mena as an herb used to 'uncross' a spell, five-fingered grass is also a recollection from Avey's childhood and represents what Karla Holloway calls 'black female memory, ... sustained through the telling and retelling of those things mystical to women. Generations are strengthened by the memories of women like Avey's Aunt Cuney who preserved them. (46)

Clearly, Avey has a history of inner strength, reinforced by her engagement with

folklore. The widow Avey, who is detached from her sense of self, benefits from recalling these aspects of herself. She grows, too, from re-visiting and confronting the events in her memory that dim the glowing potency of Avey the goddess and the repression of the Johnsons' magical humor. The turning point, she realizes, is the unplanned pregnancy that transformed her in both mind and body. Marshall shows this rising conflict with Avey, pregnant, confronting both her own image in the mirror and the clothes in the nearby closet. The author's personification of Avey's wardrobe arranges a discourse between Avey and these representations of her former selves.

Avey's skirts and suits articulate her life as a college student and as a career woman, while the stained robe she wears describes her long hours in the apartment, alone with her unreasonable suspicions of Jay's infidelity. The clothes in her closet seem to shun her, expressing the same dismay that Avey voices when she looks in the mirror: "Who—who—was this untidy swollen woman with the murderous look?" (100). In animating these items of dress, Marshall shows that Avey's real grief is not for the imaginary thin, white women she imagines as Jay's lovers, but for the more meaningful and spiritually uplifting roles she has lost. At sixty-six years old, Avey observes this scene again in her memory, creating another dimension of the self that is in the mirror and the ones that are represented by the clothes that are hanging in the closet, and allowing another opportunity to mediate the discourse that takes place between them.

Jay's horrified reaction to Avey's transformation mirrors the "rejection" from her personified clothing; backing away, his eyes give the impression of "being tightly closed against the sight of his slippers on her feet and the chenille robe with the stain on the

collar" (110). His response to Avey's screaming rage—"Do you even know who you sound like ... who you even look like?"—is a cry of anguish for how low they have sunk in their struggle to eke out a meaningful existence on Halsey Street. Avey's emotional outburst towards Jay evokes an image of the ranting beer garden wife so indelible that Jay remembers it on his deathbed. The comparison of the appearances of Avey and the ranting wife on Halsey Street emphasizes the psychic trauma that drives the couple to escape their situation; it is not a fascination with Western values that draws them, but a fear of their own future epitomized by the "half crazed woman, her children left alone in the apartment, scouring the bars and beer gardens in her nightgown" looking for her wayward husband (110).

Their class ascension affords the Johnsons a better quality of life, but also entails social obligations and expectations. Arguably, the impeccable dress adopted by Avey as a North White Plains suburban is little more than "situated bodily practice" (51) that fits within Bordieu's theory of distinction, which Entwistle cites as equally applicable to dress. However, Avey's dress is symbolic of a larger system of negative behaviors the Johnsons acquire as a wealthy couple, as safeguards against their old way of life. Jay, now the formal "Jerome," scorns the lower classes in their struggles, reminiscent of "mainstream white supremacist ways of thinking about black folks" (hooks 160). Whereas the couple once used humor as a ritual to ward off the despair they witness in their former neighbor, their new, humorless attitudes act as a shield that obstructs their memory of and empathy for the inhabitants of Halsey Street.

Not only are the Johnsons' connections to their cultural past now absent; their new

status also brings into their lives upwardly mobile "friends" whose disingenuous behavior and attitudes are equally as dispiriting as that of their unsettled neighbor in their old neighborhood. Pretentious Thomasina Moore, an aging dowager, epitomizes this type of association; and Marshall emphasizes this in Thomasina's conspicuous attire, most notably a "sheer frilly dressing gown that looked meant for a bride (it even had a slight train)" (18). Thomasina reinforces Avey's notion that real satisfaction derives from negating the past and hiding behind the costume of wealth; the cruise ship is the ideal stage for this display. Costumery that evolves from the lavish to the purely essential throughout the novel reflects Avey's own gradual return to more fulfilling modes of existence.

Avey's distorted self perception complicates her relationship to others as well as her ability to hold the "conscious historical connection" (64) that Morrison contends is key to real success. Avey has long been accustomed to judging herself and others by physical standards; " ... in the way she always did, she would quickly note the stranger's clothes. The well cut suit, coat or ensemble depending on the season. The carefully coordinated accessories" (48). Increasingly, Avey mistakes her own momentary reflection in the mirror for a stranger, a disorienting and disturbing tendency that first began as a signification as Avey's disconnection from Halsey Street. Ironically, decades later, the first step in the reversal of Avey's conflict occurs when she fails to recognize her image alongside Thomasina and Clarice in the mirror, thus gaining an understanding that she is out of place in the false environment of the cruise ship. Joyce Pettis states that *Praisesong* "brings full circle the novelist's exploration of the fractured psyche, the

regeneration of wholeness, and the proper mental distancing necessary to retain psychological equilibrium" (17). The Versailles room scene illustrates the thoroughness with which Avey has distanced from her former self.

In the masquerade created by high couture, Avey has disguised herself beyond her own recognition. Though she instantly identifies Thomasina in her "Pucci-print evening culottes" and Clarice in the "rose-colored gown she favored," she "could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine seated with them" at the table eating a parfait (48). This important scene does not yet give Avey full understanding of her predicament, but it establishes the unity of "place" and identity in Avey's mind. Interestingly, on this vacation meant for physical travel, it is Avey's mind that travels as she puzzles out her place in the world. She journeys homeward to Tatem, South Carolina in her dreams, where her Great Aunt Cuney gives her the courage to leave the cruise ship and begin her quest for identity.

Although Avey is confused by the Versailles room experience and the surreal dream of her aunt, it is these two phenomenological occurrences prompt her seemingly hasty exit from the cruise liner. Avey's dream clearly demonstrates that her relationship to clothes gives her a false sense of reality and creates a barrier between her and her family. In the dream, her aunt attempts to strip away the expensive clothes from Avey that bind her to her false sense of worth. Great Aunt Cuney is Avey's ancestor both by genetic inheritance and by her benevolent role in her life. From her, and other ancestors like her, Avey learned lessons about endurance early in life. Avey remembers her childhood emulation of her aunt, wearing an imaginary version of the second belt worn by Aunt

Cuney and other older Tatem women. Viewed as a source of "extra strength," it was "strapped low around their hips like the belt for a sword or gun holster" (33). The inspiration for the added buttressing of the second belt can be found in an expression used by Marshall's "poets in the kitchen," the strong women of her own childhood. When the women discussed "the great issues of the time," they wondered at others who did not understand, as they did, how to "'tie up your belly' (hold in the pain, that is) when things got rough and go on with life. They took their image from the bellyband that is tied around the stomach of a newborn baby to keep the navel pressed in" (Pettis 25).

However, when Aunt Cuney beckons Avey homeward, Avey's clothes are her reason for not following her: "With her hat and gloves on? And her fur stole draped over her arm? Avey Johnson could have laughed, the idea was so ridiculous" (40). Avey is in a state of denial in her wakeful life; in her dream, therefore, Aunt Cuney's aim in the "bruising fist fight" (40) that follows Avey's disobedience is to restore Avey's sense of reality. Aunt Cuney's actions in the dream are somewhat successful in that Avey begins to see things once again not for their monetary value, but as they really are. When Avey's fur stole falls onto the ground, Avey sees it as " ... some furry creature from the nearby wood that had been wantonly slain and flung in the dirt at their feet" (44). Her dream, along with the hallucination in the Versailles room, is the impetus for her leaving the cruise ship.

As Avey leaves, Thomasina's vituperative parting slurs are aimed at checking Avey's behavior back into its proper social context. She rails at Avey that she "could tell her airs were nothing but a front," (27) unaware of the irony that they all subconsciously

participate in this "front." Avey, having earlier been told by her daughter Marion that her overzealous packing is an act of someone not in her "right mind," hears a conflicting message in Thomasina's tirade. To Thomasina, Avey's abrupt departure from the cruise is unacceptable; risking class displacement indicates insanity: "She's done gone and lost her mind ... !" (24). Avey's burden is to discover her place between these two extremes. Marshall illustrates this paradox further when she subtly conjures the image of the beer garden wife alongside the raging Thomasina; Avey " ... gave her a wide berth, the way she might have some mildly demented bag woman railing to herself on the city's streets" (28). Avey once again escapes an oppressive atmosphere represented by a mad, raving woman.

Having fought with her aunt in the dream, in the hotel room Avey now follows her aunt's wordless advice by violently fighting to free herself from the constraints of her own clothing. Avey willingly "shucks," "hurls" and "flings" (144-45) away the clothing, a necessary step in preparing to meet those characters who, as her spiritual mentors, will guide Avey to a sense of belonging. Avey's anger is fueled by grief for the joy that might still have been possible for her family if only she and Jay had achieved balance between tradition and economic success. She acts out in anger, wondering what might have happened if they had been able to achieve more balance in their lives. According to Christian, "It is the release of anger, in this scene of traumatic reawakening, that allows her, this contained widow from White Plains, to 'open up the bars of her body' ... so that her mind and body can be healed" (78). Avey's symbolic casting away of the vestments that imprisoned her signals a new beginning. Avey assumes a more relaxed appearance;

sensing others' reaction to this, she imagines the hotel desk clerk's confusion upon her departure: "Could this be the same well-dressed black woman with the half-dozen suitcases who had arrived the day before?" (153).

Entwistle reminds us, summarizing Merleau-Ponty's point, that "Our bodies are not just the place from where we experience the world; it is through our bodies that we come to be seen in the world" (29). After her exhausting hotel room breakdown, Avey's visible transformation makes her more approachable to Lebert Joseph, an elderly Carriacou islander who becomes Avey's ancestor figure. Lebert, whom Avey first meets in his rum shop on the beach, thus mistakes her for one of the locals, not seeing her connection to New York, where his grandchildren have fled without learning their local traditions. His casual question illuminates new ways of viewing herself and others: "What's your nation?" (167). Marshall's attention to dress in this passage underlines the significance of Avey's evolving identity. Avey still bears traces of her wealthy American life in her expensive jewelry, hairstyle, and clothing; yet their initial rapport allows Lebert to see beyond this. With "a look like a laser beam," he understands Avey's need for guidance, taking in the "half combed hair, the damp, wrinkled dress and the self crouched like a bewildered child behind the vacant, tear-filled eyes" (172).

Avey's meeting with Lebert Joseph marks the beginning of her self discovery and her reconnection to others. If Avey is not the "same well-dressed black woman" (153) who arrived at the hotel overburdened by suitcases, Marshall resists limiting Avey to a single new identity. Instead, Avey's experiences with new friends introduce her to the hybrid nature of identity; themes of dress shift in the novel to illustrate this new phase in

Avey's journey. The lessons Avey learns from Lebert's uninhibited performance of traditional Carriacou dance in his imaginary skirt resonate well with Susan's Kaiser's observation, drawing upon Gloria Anzaldua, that when "minding appearances, individuals can explore borderlands epistemologies, recognizing them for what they are: sites under construction—sites that are liminal or hybrid, in between positionalities" (89). Further, Lebert's demonstration of the dance reconnects Avey with folklore and humor in a way that she hasn't experienced since Halsey Street with Jay, and clearly establishes Joseph's role in Avey's life:

As Aunt Cuney is her spiritual mother, so this old man is her spiritual father. But these Old Parents have also been able to go beyond gender and conflict to something deeper, more essential. Thus Cuney strides the field like a warrior in her husband's brogans and Lebert dances the Juba in an imaginary skirt. (Christian 79)

In Avey's internal experiences, Marshall crafts the process of Avey's acceptance of the Carriacou islanders as part of her family. Avey's dream of Aunt Cuney tearing her clothes off taught her that her materialistic excesses kept her from the wealth of her heritage. Likewise, Avey later foresees the islanders divesting her of her urban clothing in her impression that the islanders " ... immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of the homemade cotton prints the women were wearing ... " (72). Maude Hines, in her analysis of corporeal semiotics in the fiction of Marshall and Alice Walker, suggests that Avey's dress and luggage are a "text she has written on her body" connoting her social status, a text that the islanders would like to "rewrite" (51).

Marshall's creative use of the act of dressing (and undressing) in these passages asserts the Carriacou people as ancestors who, like Aunt Cuney, see past Avey's expensive clothing. This important stage of Avey's journey rids her of the last vestiges of her conflict when the islanders nurture Avey through her seasickness on the boat trip and symbolically remove and wash her clothing afterward; Christian states that " ... Avey's body, through nausea and excretion (supposedly shameful, yet thoroughly natural acts) relieves itself, even as her mind grasps her relationship to those around her, through history, memory, experience" (81).

As the resolution takes place in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey, through the help of her new family, is just beginning to rediscover the importance of community that Gary Storhoff explores as a major theme in Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Storhoff draws upon the anthropological schema of Victor Turner to describe the participation in "communitas" in the fictive Bournehills inhabitants of *The Chosen Place*. Storhoff explains:

In moments of communitas, one experiences the joyful acceptance of mutuality and true fellowship, a deliverance from social status, economic hierarchies, and class and racial division into a fundamentally spiritual sense of connectedness with people—in essence, exactly what Marshall defines as the major theme of her work. For Turner, communitas does not necessarily stipulate a core group of people who know each other and coordinate their actions in a planned, rationalized manner, which he associates with 'community' (Ritual 96). Rather, communitas is a

collective condition of a people, ... arising sometimes at need, or in a ritualistic moment, or by ... spontaneous opportunity. (50)

Storhoff demonstrates Marshall's development throughout *The Chosen Place* of this cooperative spirit that energizes not only the island's lifelong residents but the visitors of Bournehills as well. In *Praisesong*, readers glimpse elements of *communitas* in Avey's memories of her childhood and in her dancing with the Carriacou islanders, ending the novel with the sense that this aspect of Avey's identity is just reawakening.

## Chapter Three

### Adornment as Trickery in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* shares the themes of community through ancestor reconciliation that Marshall unfolds in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Storhoff argues "Central to *communitas* is the cyclical, repetitive, rhythmic world of myth. Through an individual's participation in myth and ritual, ... the individual is liberated from structure into a sense of *communitas*" (51).

*Ceremony*, with its strong focus on myth, asserts its freedom from traditional Western modes of independence early in the novel. To G. Thomas Couser, the narrative, in its traditional native form, is an act of liberation from Western ideals of originality in authorship; its resonance with tribal story sources " ... presents or enacts a sort of healing performance," giving the novel a "ritualistic function" that Couser does not find in *Praisesong for the Widow* (116). The ceremonial performance is essential to the reestablishment of the sense of *communitas* that has been lost among the Laguna people of the novel.

A growing indoctrination of non-native ideology, as well as racist attitudes towards "half breeds" from the villagers themselves, complicates the unity inherent in *communitas*. Suzanne Lundquist asserts that Native characters need to " ... overcome the influences that have produced Indians in favor of a restoration to specific tribal ancestries and inheritances as well as tribal homelands—Hopi, Navajo, Sioux, ... and so forth"

(202). Scott B. Vickers points out that when tribal communities handle health and social problems without outside intervention, it is counted as success and moves them one step closer to sovereignty (qtd. in Lundquist 202). In *Ceremony*, the tribe grieves for those instances in which they are not able to resolve conflicts without the interference of mainstream society. The ceremony, or healing ritual, performed by the protagonist Tayo is reflective of the community's desire to find culturally relevant ways to solve its problems.

Though military physicians have discouraged traditional Laguna treatment for Tayo's post-war psychological problems, Tayo's grandmother's declaration that "That boy needs a medicine man" (33) initiates a healing process that benefits the entire community. Non-Laguna doctors who have diagnosed Tayo's visions and uncontrollable nausea as battle fatigue fail to recognize that, in addition to the horrific sights he saw during the war, Tayo feels that his actions have brought a drought upon the Laguna reservation. Having been shunned and scorned as a half breed by his aunt since he was dropped off at four years of age to live with her, his Uncle Josiah and their son Rocky, Tayo's journey also serves to recover his self identity.

Silko demonstrates, with Auntie's failure to rescue Tayo's mother from her self destructive lifestyle, the far reaching effects of breeching the traditional sense of community on the reservation. Tayo's mother, known only as "Little Sister," develops a poor self esteem when taught at the Indian School to style her dress, hair and lipstick "exactly like the white girls" (69). As a result, she feels shame for her own culture and hatred for abusive whites. When Little Sister strays from the community in drunken

collusions with men, her community suffers because "what happened to the girl did not happen to her alone, it happened to all of them" (69). The focus of the community's anger is on Auntie, who is expected to bring her sister back. She might have been able to fulfill this obligation had it not been for the "holy missionary white people" (68) at Little Sister's school who filled her with self loathing and taught her to abandon her traditions and distance herself from her family.

Auntie's malicious account of Tayo's mother's nudity, told to the adult Tayo shortly after his mother's death, is an image as well crafted and as horrifying to the psyche as Marshall's stained robe in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Auntie's story, which ostensibly takes place before Tayo's birth, is calculated to cast shame on the circumstances of his conception and to express her resentment of his presence in her home, a reminder of her failure. In the story, Auntie follows her instincts to find Little Sister, who had been out all night, by walking to the river: "Right as the sun came up, she walked under that big cottonwood tree, and I could see her clearly: she had no clothes on. Nothing. She was completely naked except her high heel shoes" (70). Auntie purposely offers no other details of Little Sister's behavior; in her omission, the state of undress implies to Tayo its own context. The high heels, a fetish item, eroticize the situation more effectively than complete nudity. Anne Hollander theorizes the relationship between clothing and nudity in art: "The partial dress and the partial body refer to each other, and each to the style of the other. Conventions in partial exposure further demonstrate how the significance of nudity is created by clothes themselves, not their absence" (236). The scene created by partial nudity in this passage of the novel emphasizes the depth of

Tayo's identity crisis; his hopes for a more complete connection to his mother are dashed by a fragmented story aimed at reminding Tayo that his claim to the community is only partial.

The narrative structure of *Ceremony* intersperses fragments of mythic story with the dominant story line, intersecting the shift between present time and memory in Tayo's mind as he struggles to overcome his crisis. Helen Dennis suggests that the novel might be "better read as a long, post-modernist text, which employs devices from both narrative fiction and modernist poetry, including the extensive use of correspondence" (45). In an early example of corresponding myth and "reality," the novel's attitude towards the significance of body adornment emerges. Pa'caya'ni, claiming that he is a medicine man with magical powers, distracts twin brothers Ma'see'wi and Ou'yu'ye'wi from their responsibility of tending to the corn mother altar. Silko describes in poetic form how he mesmerizes his audience as he publicly prepares his body for the performance of magic: "He undressed/ he painted his body/ the whorls of flesh/ the soles of his feet/ the palms of his hands/ the top of his head./ He wore feathers on each side of his head" (47). This adornment ritual begins a series of supernatural acts that the narrator later reveals are "all just a trick" (48). Consequently, the corn mother is enraged by the brothers' gullibility and neglect of their familial responsibilities: "So she took/ the plants and grass from them./ No baby animals were born./ She took the/ rainclouds with her" (49). This myth, which introduces the concept of dressing as a tool of deception and of the consequences of ignoring cultural obligations, precedes and corresponds to Tayo's experiences with the military uniform.

Lurie calls the uniform "the extreme form of conventional dress ... , the costume totally determined by others ... " (17). To wear a uniform "is to give up one's right to act as an individual—in terms of speech, to be partially or wholly censored. What one does, as well as what one wears, will be determined by external authorities ... " (18). In *Ceremony*, the uniform censors the Laguna soldiers' ethnicity, tricking them into a temporary illusion of equality. Consequently, when they return to civilian dress, the racist treatment to which they had become inured before the war becomes painfully obvious. Back home, the veterans actively extend the feeling of pride associated with the military uniform through bar room stories that both recount and revise their respective experiences during the war.

The function of the veterans' bar room tales is best understood when applying Anne Hollander's argument comparing clothes to a " ... literary form, of which the canonical examples have been assimilated by the reading public" (xv). Given this analogy, the re-assimilation of the uniforms through the boasting sessions in the bars is myth. Silko indicates this by conscious attention to formatting, offsetting the most outrageous of these tales from the rest of the text, similar to the traditional myths interspersed within the novel. As they all bolster themselves with alcohol, Harley, Leroy and Emo exchange stories while Tayo retreats inside himself, feeling that " ... he was safe there; the winds of rage could not touch him" (40). Like most myths, the story is not attributed to any particular veteran, suggesting that it might have been told by any of them:

White women never looked at me until I put on that uniform, and then by

God I was a U.S. Marine and they came crowding around. All during the war they'd say to me, 'Hey, soldier, you sure are handsome. All that black thick hair.' ... You know Los Angeles was the biggest city I ever saw. All those streets and tall buildings. ... I never saw so many bars and juke boxes ... . They never asked me if I was Indian; sold me as much beer as I could drink. I was a big spender then. Had my military pay. Double starch in my uniform and my boots shining so good. I mean those white women fought over me. (40-41)

The fragment of Tayo's memory that follows this mythical account recalls another side of the story. He remembers the first day that he and Rocky walked through Oakland together in their uniforms, when an elderly white woman " ... rolled down the window and said 'God bless you, God bless you,' but it was the uniform, not them, that she blessed" (41). Even at this early point in his military career, Tayo, like the islanders in *Praisesong for the Widow*, sees through the drama created by clothing.

While Tayo is angered by such hypocrisy, Emo's war story conveys an alternative strategy for coping with his own resentment of the racism revealed by white people's reactions to his uniform. Emo's outlandish tale restores his dignity by placing him in the powerful role of trickster, using the anonymity of the uniform to gain sexual favors from white women who would not have otherwise been attracted to him. At a bar during the war, Emo points out two white women to his fellow soldier, the "crazy Irishman" (58) O'Shay, announcing that he wants the one with "big tits and real blond hair" (58). Emo assumes the identity of "this Wop in our unit" (58), an Italian named Mattucci, to increase

his sexual prospects with the woman; this is wildly successful, he tells the other veterans, claiming to have "scored" with both women in the same bed. Though the story, of dubious veracity, brings much laughter from most of his fellow veterans, Emo sudden sullenness shows that even his posturing and trickery is not an effective defense against the oppression he has suffered.

When pressured to participate, Tayo's response breaks with their traditional bar room exchanges by interjecting the reality that the stories are meant to suspend. While the others create stories about the illusions of the military uniform, Tayo's brutally honest story simply holds a mirror to his fellow war veterans: "See these dumb Indians thought these good times would last. They didn't ever want to give up the cold beer and the blond cunt. ... They had the uniform and they didn't look different no more. They got respect" (42). To Lurie, removing the uniform as a sign system is often a relief; in terms of clothing as a discourse, to exchange the uniform for civilian clothing is to "abandon official speech" (19). For the Native American veterans, their loss of official discourse underlines their general lack of voice in mainstream society.

Tayo claims to speak from "both sides," assuming the mixed ethnicity for which he is scorned, especially by Emo, to dispel the fantasy implicit in the war stories. However, his unique perspective is not of the experience of both being Laguna and being white; he speaks instead as one who has been oppressed by both whites and Lagunas because of his mixed ancestry:

I'm a half-breed. I'll be the first to say it. ... Don't lie. You knew right away. The war was over. The uniform was gone. All of a sudden the man

at the store waits on you last, ... until all the white people bought what they wanted. And the white lady at the bus depot. She's real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change. You watch it slide across the counter at you, and you know. (42)

Tayo clearly sees the uniform as a symbol of the temporary societal worth conferred upon him and his friends, but to Harley, Emo and Leroy, Tayo has just ruined their attempts to revive the sense of belonging they felt during the war. Tayo weeps for his friends, who blame themselves for losing those feelings, " ... just as they blame themselves for losing the land the white people took" (43). That they want acceptance and friendship among whites is beyond Tayo's understanding: "They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was the white people who took it away again when the war was over" (43).

Silko, through the veterans' bar encounter with Helen Jean, offers a new perspective on the harm perpetuated by the war stories in the novel. Helen Jean, who turns to prostitution to support herself and her family back home, doubles for Tayo's mother, in the tale of self hatred told by her appearance. While she is tending to her frequent lipstick application and pencilling in of thin eyebrows, she notices that her hair, cut close and permed tightly, is dirty, but reasons that "at least it wasn't long or straight" (166). Her perception that any other identity is preferable to one associated with her own culture is reinforced by the men at the bar. The sergeant with the "khaki shirt with the stripes on the arm" shows Helen Jean his "little brown star on a blue ribbon" (164) and then tells her the stories that are a part of the uniform myth, of blonde-haired women who

were enamored with him. He hits Helen Jean when she refuses to leave, demanding: "You think you're better than a white woman?" (165).

The myth of Kaup'a'ta, the gambler, which appears soon after the passage about Helen Jean, is a haunting analogy to the dangerous temptation characters in this novel face when they gamble away their own identities for a semblance of equality with the dominant culture :

He walked and turned around for them  
to show off his fancy clothes and expensive beads.  
Then he told them he would gamble with them—  
their clothes, their beads for his.  
Most people wore their old clothes  
when they went hunting in the mountains;  
so they figured they didn't have much to lose.  
Anyway, they might win all his fine things.  
Not many could pass up his offer. (170-1)

None of his victims are successful in this gamble, and Kaup'a'ta cuts out the hearts of those who try. In much the same way, the Native American soldiers of the novel surrender their own identities and return to the reservation to become alcoholics, attempting to resurrect their fleeting status through their stories. Helen Jean makes a conscious choice to believe these stories, not wanting to be considered as unsophisticated as she perceives her elders (163). Like others, she accepts the veterans as companions because " ... if the U.S. Government decorated them, they must be okay" (163). Yet,

Helen Jean recognizes the sad myth of the uniform; she tires of participating in it and " ... making believe it had lasted" (166). Helen Jean, like Avey coming to her senses in the Versailles room and Tayo disrupting the barroom braggadocio, is surrounded by others who see, in the same act of dress, a different story than she witnesses. Likewise, discord between Rocky and Tayo that arises from their differing perceptions during a battle is central to Tayo's conflict in the novel.

One of the most traumatic memories of his war experiences is Tayo's hallucination of his uncle in place of an enemy soldier; long afterwards Tayo is haunted by the implications that this vision has for his sanity. Tayo, who has begun to notice that the Japanese soldiers' skin tone is similar to his own, is unable to obey orders to fire on the enemy. Tayo's comrades and commanding officers treat his hysteria in various ways, administering medication and reassuring Tayo that his hallucination is associated either with battle fatigue or malaria. Rocky's attempts to reason away Tayo's fears only reinforce Tayo's convictions. Yet Tayo is disturbed that, because he can " ... follow the logic of what Rocky said," the vision that seems so lucid is "impossible" (8). Tayo's crisis is not solely the result of battle fatigue, as military physicians and commanding officers suggest, but confusion and doubt over his own sanity. Silko makes this clear in a description of Tayo's anxiety the day after the shooting: "He felt the shivering then; it began at the tips of his fingers and pulsed into his arms. He shivered because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference anymore; ... he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat" (8-9).

Rocky's "logic", in part, is an attempt to objectify the Japanese soldier to Tayo

beyond any justification of compassion: "Tayo, this is a Jap! This is a Jap uniform!" These two statements carry the same signification; from Rocky's perspective, "Jap" and "Jap uniform" are one and the same. He "reads" the enemy soldier much as Maude Hines' analysis of corporeal semiotics in *Praisesong for the Widow* describes: "Assigning significance (and thereby creating a sign) is a reading process; attempting to read a body ... as an empty text, ... dismissing subjectivity in order to project meaning onto bodily 'markings' is a specifically essentialist reading" (39). Rocky's rationalization to Tayo that the shooting is what they are "supposed to do" (8) demonstrates that this objectification is Rocky's device for coping with the duties expected of him in the war, but this approach does not comfort Tayo.

While Tayo's ceremony ultimately leads him to a discovery that restores his personal well being in a way that the treatment of his military doctors could not, the ritual is equally crucial to his community's recovery. This phase in Tayo's journey recalls Avey's recognition, upon leaving the island, of her responsibility to help "others elsewhere" (255). Whereas Avey plans to teach others what she has learned about balancing success with spirituality, Tayo's contribution to his own community is to amend the great wrong he commits in causing a drought to devastate their land. Tayo's realization of his culpability in the drought emerges, in part, from advice he recalls that Uncle Josiah passed on to him from their ancestors, that "droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave" (115). Couser reasons that, "If to forget is to misbehave, then to remember, as Tayo learns to, is to restore the balance. Like Avey, Tayo needs to remember (how) to remember" (115). In *Ceremony*, Couser argues, memory is "the

medium that links people harmoniously with one another and to the earth" (115).

Whether Tayo's ceremonial reparations for his actions are symbolic of memory or a physical illustration of his guilt, Tayo remembers well the day that he cursed the rain.

Attempting to stay upright in the slick mud while he and the corporal carry the fatally wounded Rocky through the jungle on the Bataan death march, Tayo is enraged by the added burden caused by the torrential downpour. His cursing of the rain is as ceremonial as the ritual he later seeks to rectify his actions:

He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud to find the corporal and get him up before the Japanese saw them. He wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky ... .

The words gathered inside him and gave him strength. He pulled on the corporal's arm; he lifted him to his knees and all the time he could hear his own voice praying against the rain. (12)

The first fragment of the myth woven through the novel appears after Tayo's memory of his rage against the rain. In this corresponding tale, Corn Woman expresses anger at her sister, Iktoa'ak'o'ya-Reed Woman for her seemingly easy task of producing the rain while Corn Woman labors all day in the field. In poetic stanza, Silko shows how Corn Woman's failure to appreciate her sister's equally important work results in the same tragic consequences of Tayo's curse: "The people and the animals/ were thirsty./ They were starving" (14). Tayo's memories of this myth allows him to confront his own guilt about breaking his promise to Uncle Josiah to help him with the land and animals by joining the military. The myth establishes a pattern, through fragments, that illustrates the

need for respecting elders of the community, echoing Morrison's observation of conventions in ancestor stories of African American literature: "When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself" (62).

When Tayo's grandmother recounts her impression of the first atomic bomb test explosion, her anecdote becomes as important a part of Tayo's crisis resolution as the guidance of his shaman. Ostensibly sharing a random story with her grandson, she weaves a significant element into the story that Tayo will later remember as he arrives at the conclusion of his ceremony. Grandma tells Tayo the story with the rhythm of a folk tale, " ... patting his arm as she talked, tapping out the story with her hand" (245). There had been a blinding light, she tells him, and then wonders, "Why did they make a thing like that?" (245). Grandma's idle question becomes Tayo's chilling realization of the interconnection of all people in the face of a danger that begins on the Trinity bomb site, so close to the reservation. With his epiphany, he understands that the vision of Uncle Josiah falling to the ground in place of the Japanese soldier has its own logic, and his confidence in this logic is restored:

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time. (246)

*Ceremony* adds depth to the common message of brotherhood and tradition by blaming "witchery" as the larger force behind both the oppressive actions of whites and

the self delusion of the young soldiers and prostitutes in the novel. Relationships of characters with dress metaphorize this witchery and thus underline the seriousness of the crisis. This is evident in the the yearnings of Helen Jean and Tayo's mother, "Little Sister," but emblemized most poignantly in the misleading temptation of the uniform. Applying Hollander's suggestion of dress as literary convention, the uniform becomes either the story of a legendary hero or the pathetic tale of a deluded and broken man, depending upon the perspective of the narrator, and takes its place as myth among the many other stories of *Ceremony*.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

Characters in *Ceremony* participate in the powerful and deceptive act of dress primarily through discussing, remembering, and envisioning it, elucidating the significance of dress in both their interior thoughts and the external world. Perhaps this veiled approach is why, although dress is critical to the major themes in *Ceremony*, it appears less a conscious and consistent pattern than Marshall's treatment of it in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Marshall employs clothes more frequently as a revelation of character traits than does Silko, metaphorizing the dramatic change in Avey's worldview from the self-conscious and troubled widow to the exuberant and refreshed traveler who leaves the island with plans to share her story. However, both works rely on their images of clothing for much more than basic development.

Marshall and Silko juxtapose images, such as Avey with her neighbor, and the Japanese soldier with Uncle Josiah, that repeatedly remind Avey and Tayo of their connection to others. This differs from simply using dress as a device to develop character traits, which focuses on specific qualities that distinguish protagonists from other characters. In *Praisesong* and *Ceremony*, these images, as reminders, are crucial to the story line in that they reestablish Avey's and Tayo's sense of community with their brethren. In Marshall's text, ancestor figures appear in dreams to encourage, warn and teach Avey, and these cues from the past nurture her recognition and trust in new ancestor

types when she encounters them. Equally important to her self esteem is Avey's reconnection, through these visions, with alternate ways of existing that offer her the spiritual contentment she does not find in North White Plains.

Threads, disentangled from the more complex weave of fabric, are the basic symbols hinted in both texts as metaphors for solutions to both Avey's and Tayo's problems. Tayo, in the beginning "could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present ... like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket when he was a child" (6). When Tayo tries to separate and "rewind them into their places," the threads only become more tangled (6). This image resonates well with his lesson, at the end of the novel, that people are all bound together through timeless stories. Avey also remembers an image of threads from her childhood, " ... streaming out of everyone there to enter her, making her part of what seemed a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity" (249). On the island at the end of her journey, she experiences this connection once again with " ... threads which were thin to the point of invisibility, yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island" (249). These invisible threads might be the seamless skill with which Marshall and Silko weave the theme of clothing and adornment into their texts, strengthening the important messages of cultural rejuvenation and unity.

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