

African Heritage and Diasporic  
Identity in Paule Marshall's  
*Praisesong for the Widow*



Valenza Pauline Burke, later known as Paule Marshall, was born on April 9, 1929, in Brooklyn, New York. She was the daughter of immigrants from Barbados, and she grew up in a neighborhood where families from the West Indies were numerous. Her writing was deeply inspired by the conversations between her mother and other Barbadian women, their musical accents and storytelling skills. Her use of language reflects her West Indian culture. Her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, was published in 1959. It narrates the coming of age of a West Indian girl in the context of the Black diasporic experience in America. Marshall's fiction is rooted in Black cultural history. Her novels focus on Black female characters and address the conditions of women from a Black diasporic perspective. Other works are: *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), *Reena* (1962), *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and *Daughters* (1991). *Praisesong* won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1984. It was written to honor her ancestors and is dedicated to Marshall's grandmother (To Da-Duh). The novel takes place in the 1970s and it chronicles the life of Avey Johnson, a 64-year-old African American widow on a journey in the Caribbean, who discovers a possibility to reconnect with the cultures of African descent.

Aug. 16, 2019

[Paule Marshall](#), an influential writer whose novels and short stories about ethnic identity, race and colonialism reflected her upbringing in Brooklyn as a daughter of poor immigrants from Barbados, died on Monday in Richmond, Va. She was 90.

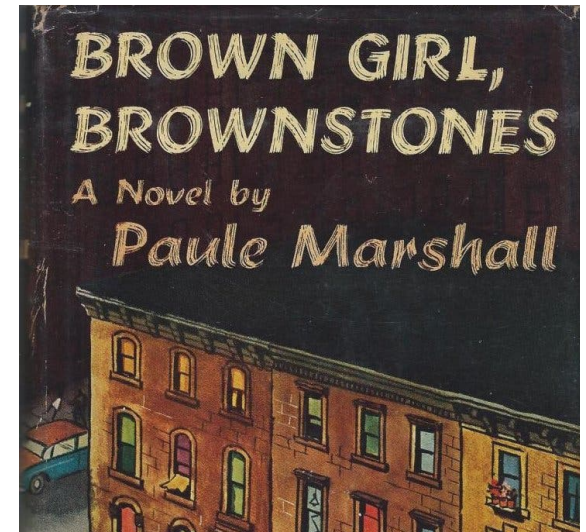
Her son, Evan Marshall, confirmed the death.

Through five novels and several collections of short stories and novellas, Ms. Marshall (whose first name is pronounced “Paul”) created strong female characters, evoked the linguistic rhythms of Barbadian speech, and forged an early link between the African-American and Caribbean literary canons.

Evelyn Hawthorne, an English professor at Howard University, described Ms. Marshall in the journal *The Black Scholar* in 2000 as “the critical bridge” between earlier black female writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks and the next wave of African-American and Caribbean writers like [Toni Morrison](#) (who died this month), [Maya Angelou](#) and [Jamaica Kincaid](#).

Ms. Marshall’s first novel, “Brown Girl, Brownstones” (1959), validated “culture-specific values, language, histories and traditions,” Ms. Hawthorne said.

*New York Times* obituary



Paule Marshall (1929-2019)



After struggling for some time, I was finally able to bring together what I consider to be the two themes most central to my work: the importance of truly confronting the past, both in personal and historical terms, and the necessity of reversing the present order.

—Paule Marshall, “Shaping the World of My Art.”

She changed her name to Paule when she applied for jobs in journalism, believing that the explicitly female Pauline would hurt her prospects. She was hired at *Our World*, a black picture magazine, and wrote articles from Brazil and Barbados.

But she soon turned to fiction. In addition to “Brown Girl, Brownstones,” her novels were “The Chosen Place, The Timeless People (1969), “Praisesong for the Widow (1983), “Daughters” (1991) and “The Fisher King” (2000).

In her review in *The Times* of “Praisesong,” the story of an older black woman on a journey to a Caribbean island, [the novelist Anne Tyler](#) called it a “convincing and eerily dreamlike” book that “rings with the same music and some of the same lilting Barbadian speech” of “Brown Girl.”

When “Brown Girl” was reissued in 1983, Darryl Pinckney noted in *The New York Review of Books*: “Paule Marshall does not let the black women in her fiction lose. While they lose friends, lovers, husbands, homes or jobs, they always find themselves.”



# “Shaping the World of My Art” (1973)

“... for black people to define ourselves on our own terms we must consciously engage our past...”

The past offers much instruction for the present struggle...”

# Shaping the World of My Art

*Paule Marshall*

To talk about early influences it will be necessary to take a giant step back to that stage in life when, without being conscious of it, I began the never-ending apprenticeship which is writing. It began in of all places the ground-floor kitchen of a brownstone house in Brooklyn. Let me try to recreate the setting for you. Picture if you will a large old-fashioned kitchen with a second-hand refrigerator, the kind they used to have back then in the thirties with the motor on top, a coal stove that in its blackness, girth, and the heat it threw off during the winter overwhelmed the gas range next to it, a sink whose pipes never ceased their rusty cough, and a large table covered in flowered oilcloth set like an altar in the middle of the room.

It was at this table that the faithful, my mother and her women friends, would gather almost every afternoon upon returning from their



jobs as domestics. Their work day had begun practically at dawn with the long train ride out to the white sections of Brooklyn. There, the ones who weren't lucky enough to have a steady job would stand on the street corners waiting for the white, mainly Jewish, housewives to come along and hire them for a half day's work cleaning their houses. The auction block was still very real for them.

Later, armed with the few dollars they had earned, my mother and her friends would make the long trip back to our part of town and there, in the sanctuary of our kitchen, talk endlessly, passionately. I didn't realize it then but those long afternoon rap sessions were highly functional. They were the means which helped them exorcise the day's humiliations and restore them to themselves. A way to overcome.

For me, listening in a corner of the kitchen (seen, but not heard, as was the rule back then), it wasn't only what the women talked about, the content; above all, it was their poet's skill with words. They had taken the language imposed upon them and imbued it with their own incisive rhythms and syntax, brought to bear upon it the few African words that had been retained. I was impressed, without being able to define it, by the seemingly effortless way they had mastered the form of story telling. They didn't know it, nor did I at the time, but they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa. . . .

Moreover, all that free-wheeling talk together with the sometimes bawdy jokes and the laughter which often swept the kitchen was, at its deepest level, an affirmation of their own worth; it said they could not be defeated by demeaning jobs and the day spent scrubbing other people's floors. Theirs was the spirit you sense when listening to the blues, to the spiritual, to the driving energy of jazz. They had transcended their condition through the medium of language.

*I grew up among poets. Nothing about them suggested that poetry was their calling. They were just a group of ordinary housewives, my mother included -- the basement kitchen of the brownstone house where my family lived was the usual gathering place. Once inside the warm safety of its walls the women threw off the drab coats and hats, seated themselves at the large center table, drank their cups of tea or cocoa, and talked while my sister and I sat at a smaller table over in a corner doing our homework, they talked-endlessly, passionately, poetically and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. When people at readings and writers' conferences asked me who my major influences were, they are sometimes a little disappointed when I don't immediately name the usual literary giants. True, I am indebted to those writers, white and black, whom I read during my formative years and still read for instruction and pleasure. But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge*



*before all others; the group of women around the table long ago-this is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen.*

*— The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen*

*Praisesong for the Widow* started with a place. I came across this place called Ibo Landing in a book entitled *Drums and Shadows*, which was a series of interviews with some very old people who lived on the Sea Islands, off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Nearly everyone spoke of a place on one of the islands called Ibo Landing. According to a story handed down over the years, a group of Ibo slaves decided they didn't like the looks of America as soon as they were brought ashore and turned around and walked back home across the Atlantic Ocean. That's how *Praisesong* began, with that folktale.<sup>102</sup>

“Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall,” by Lisa Sisco and Melody Graulich, *NWSA Journal* 1992



**Paule Marshall**

—Author of **BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES**

**Praisesong  
for the  
Widow**



**Paule Marshall**

"Astoundingly moving."  
—Ann Tyler, *New York Times Book Review*



BY THE AUTHOR OF **DAUGHTERS**

**Praisesong  
for the Widow**

## THE TITLE

- In West African cultures a **praisesong** is a particular kind of traditional heroic poem, intended to be recited or sung at public occasions, that can mark the advancement of a person from one group or stage to the next.
- This novel celebrates the widow's coming to terms with her widowhood and reconnection with her black heritage. The entire narrative in itself acts as a "praisesong" for the widow.
- The title also refers specifically to the communal song and the dance of the "Beg Pardon" at the end of the novel, which itself becomes a praisesong for Avey's homecoming.
- It's the story of a journey which is not only physical, but also **psychological**.
- It's a journey of **reclamation and healing** of a past that has been largely forgotten or erased in Avey's efforts to escape the poverty of her younger years and obtain the American dream of financial security and white-defined respectability.
- The novel reiterates Marshall's belief in "the need for black people to make the psychological and spiritual journey back through their past."

# Praisesongs

- Praisesongs may embrace the history, myths, and legends of a whole people or their representative and can be used to celebrate communal triumph or the greatness of rulers, and the nobility of the valiant and brave, whether in life or death. Important for its use [in Marshall's novel], they can also be sung to mark social transition. Sung as a part of rites of passage, they mark the upward movement of a person from one group to the next.
- Abena P. A. Busia, "What Is Your Nation?", 1989

## The novel: Four sections - In medias res beginning and flashbacks

**“Runagate”**: chapters 1-6 (Bianca Pride/Grenada/Tatem; Avey, feeling sick, abandons the cruise, leaving behind her friends Thomasina and Clarice, and finds a room in a hotel, while waiting for the first flight back to New York; strange visions and dreams, memories of her aunt Cuney and Tatem, Sea Islands); epigraphs: “Runagate, Runagate” by Robert Hayden (poem about a fugitive slave); “Ieroy” by Amiri Baraka

**“Sleeper’s Wake”**: chapters 1-5 (Grenada; during the night, Avey recalls her married life, moving to Halsey Street, having her daughters, struggling to make ends meet, the good times and the deteriorating relationship with Jay, moving to North White Plains, Jay’s death

**“Lavé Tête”**: chapters 1- 6(Grenada/Carriacou; goes strolling on the beach, meets Lebert Joseph, unexpectedly starts telling him about leaving the cruise etc, after he asks her what «her nation» is and she can’t reply; accepts his invitation to attend the great dance for the «Old Parents» in Carriacou, the Big Drum; sea-sick during the boat trip to the island); epigraphs: vodou prayer, poem by Randall Jarrell

**“The Beg Pardon”**: chapters 1-3 (Carriacou; Rosalie, Lebert Joseph’s daughter, takes care of her like a mother, Avey takes part in the Big Drum and joins the dance;on the plane to Grenada, flashforward to her future life); epigraph: Susan Sontag on memory

# Avey Johnson's Journey away from Blackness

Harlem

Brooklyn (Halsey Street)

North White Plains

Bianca Pride

# Back to Roots

Bianca Pride cruising the Caribbean (“Runagate”)

Grenada (“The Sleeper’s Wake”, “Lavé Tête”)

Carriacou (“The Beg Pardon”)

Tatem

# Themes

- Rational mind vs body
- Conforming vs differing
- History vs myth
- Materialism vs spiritualism
- Individual vs community
- Spiritual death vs awakening
- Modernity vs timelessness
- Standard language vs Vernacular
- Writing vs orality
- Institutionalized knowledge vs alternative ways of knowing (music, dance, rituals)

1) "Runagate" is a reference to Robert Hayden's famous poem of that name (about a slave escaping from bondage towards a mythic North, enveloped in darkness)

runagate > runaway

is Avey running away from her blackness towards whiteness? Several occurrences of whiteness (Bianca Pride, North White Plains, a white neighborhood in NY, the whiteness of other cruisers) vs blackness (Avey's body etc)

She is also running away from a disturbing familiarity with the islanders? Language is foreign but familiar at the same time

split self, denial, etc. A. is not able to recognize herself in the mirror

3 types of African American womanhood: Thomasina, the tragic mulatta (high valued within the black community), Jezebel; Clarice, the submissive black woman (Mama Johnson); Avey, queenly, proud, the virago or devil woman

Avatara (named after an ancestor): sounds too black so she has shortened it to Avey; avatar: embodiment of divinity

Denial of her blackness through clothing, language, external appearance, non-verbal behavior BUT black body re-emerging in the bottom lip

Denial of racial issues and American racism, resurfacing in her dreams

She starts dreaming again, dream about great-aunt Cuney

Her ancestor claiming her



## 2) Sleeper's Wake

a wake for the past, the whole section's action takes place in Avey's mind while she is laying on the bed in an expensive hotel room in Grenada waiting to catch the first plane to NYC

Avey reviews her marriage to Jerome Johnson, from the first happy years (dance and music and love) when he was just Jay, to his transformation into a hard-working no nonsense man whose fear of poverty and degradation leads to spiritual starvation

White mask

Is a different way possible? «Couldn't they have done differently? Hadn't there perhaps been another way? [...] It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. To take only what was needed and to run. And distance. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential»

Avey peels off her accessories, releases her anger, she is ready for spiritual cleansing and the opening of the bars of her body

### 3) Lavé Tete

Lebert Joseph: resembles (name, appearance, behavior) the Yoruba god of the crossroads and trickster, Eshu-Elegba, or Legba. Legba is the opener of the gates between the human world and the spirit world. In Haiti, Legba is depicted as an old man supported by a walking cane, smoking a pipe and carrying a macoute, a large straw bag. Besides being opener of the gates, Legba is guardian of the crossroads, the point of entry to the spirit world. As its guardian Legba straddles the worlds of the living and the world of the dead.





#### 4) The Beg Pardon

The Big Drum dance as a community ritual where diasporic blacks remember their ancestors and beg them to forgive them for being far from the ancestral land. Avey recovers her black identity, one that is not an essentialized Africanness but rather a partially reconstructed self from memory and imagination.

Flashforward to the future: she takes over her aunt Cuney 's role as keeper of memories.



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

Anna Scacchi, “Never Too Late to Remember: Cruising the Past in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*.”



Over at the couch, with the suitcase laid open on top of the bedcovers, she made quick work of the clothes, tossing them helter-skelter into the bag without a trace of the neatness and order that were her hallmark. A minute later found her back at the closet, blindly reaching and snatching at whatever came to her hand in the darkness. Then, noiseless as a sneak thief, she was beating it back to the couch, her arms piled high again.

Perspiration was beginning to sheet her forehead despite the air-conditioning in the cabin. She didn't stop to wipe it. The determined look on her face had brought her underlip jutting forward, exposing the spillover of raw pink across the top which she always kept hidden. She let the lip stay as it was. The back pain she suffered with occasionally was threatening to flare up with all the bending and hauling. She closed her mind to it.

Her mind in a way wasn't even in her body, or for that matter, in the room. From the moment she had awakened in a panic less than an hour ago and come to the reckless decision, her mind had left to go and stand down at the embarkation door near the waterline five decks below. While she swiftly

Her skirts, blouses and summer suits were done. The sweaters and stoles she drew around her when the weather on deck turned chilly had been packed after a fashion. Crowded into the wrong bag were the linen shirtdresses she wore on excursions ashore in place of the shorts and slacks favored by the other women her age on board, no matter what their size. Her shoes were in their special caddy. Her hats in their cylindrical box. And she had just disposed of the last of her underthings. All that remained were her ensemble dresses and evening gowns. She was down to the last of the six suitcases.

“But why six, Mother? Why would anyone in their right mind need to take this much stuff just to go away for a couple of weeks?”—Marion, Avey Johnson’s youngest, the morning she had come to drive her mother to the pier before her first cruise three years ago. Entering the house, Marion had stopped short at sight of the half-dozen bags neatly lined up in the downstairs hall, had stood staring at them for the longest time, trying to contain her exasperation but failing. When she finally looked up it had been all she could do, from her expression, not to reach out and grab her mother by the shoulders and shake her the way she might have one of her pupils in the small community school she helped to run in a church in Brooklyn. To shake sense into her. Around the face which bore Jay’s clear imprint, her hair had stood massed like a raincloud about to make good its threat. And the noisy necklace of cowrie shells and amber she had brought back from Togo her last visit had sounded her angry despair with its rattle each time she breathed.



Avey Johnson's own mother would have slapped Marion down long ago had she been her child—and never mind she was twenty-eight and a woman already married and divorced. She would have raised a hard palm and with a blow to set her ears ringing put her in her place: “Girl, where you get off talking to *me* like that?”

And the Avey Johnson of thirty, forty years ago would have done likewise. She had been quick then to show her displeasure, her bottom lip immediately unfolding to bare the menacing sliver of pink and then her mouth letting fly with the words. But she had grown away from such high-strung behavior, and over the years had developed a special silence to deal with anyone the likes of Marion. With her daughter she simply acted as if nothing unpleasant was being said, that Marion was still, as she had once been, the most polite and tractable of her children.

“Here last summer I begged you to go on that tour to Brazil, and on the one, the year before that, to Ghana . . .” The voice hung unrelenting at her ear as she made the final hurried trips between the closet again and the couch. “And all I got for an answer was either ‘we’ll see’ or that infuriating silence of yours. Yet here you are willing and eager to go off on some ridiculous cruise. Could you have thought of anything more banal!”

Banal? For a second before she quickly checked herself the word had threatened to overturn the rock of her calm. Did Marion know that the closest she had ever come to a cruise in her life had been the annual boatripe up the Hudson to Bear Mountain as a child? What did she know?

And they, it turned out, had been right and Marion wrong. Because whatever doubts she had managed to sow in Avey Johnson's mind vanished the moment she saw the *Bianca Pride* that first time in her berth at West Fortieth Street and the river, with the flags and pennants flying from all her stations, her high bow canted toward the sun. All that dazzling white steel! Her hull appeared to sweep clear across to New Jersey. The precision and power of her lines! The ship's turbines, she had read in the brochure they had sent her before sailing, produced enough heat and light to run a city the size of Albany! And on a group tour of the bridge that first trip she had seen the huge Ferranti computer that monitored all operations on board. Her group had stood awestruck and reverent before the console with its array of keyboards, switches and closed-circuit television screens.

There had been no resisting it! Thomasina Moore had no sooner suggested a return trip the following year than she had accepted. And Marion, seeing her resolve, began keeping her objections to herself. Her eyes had carefully avoided the suit-



“What you doing up and dressed so early?”

A pair of grayish eyes with the unblinking watchfulness of a bird's were peering through the divider's narrow openings. They were like eyes at the slot of a speakeasy door.

Seconds later, wearing a sheer frilly dressing gown that looked meant for a bride (it even had a slight train), Thomasina Moore stepped curiously around the divider into the living area.

She was a thin-featured woman in her early seventies with a lined and hectic brow, what used to be called “good hair” covered over with a sleeping net, and the first signs of a dowager's hump across her shoulders: old age beginning to warp the once graceful curve of her back. She could still, though—she liked to boast—kick her legs as high as when she had danced in the chorus line of the Cotton Club back in

the twenties. (At least she claimed it had been the Cotton Club. Which might have been true. She had the color to have qualified: black that was the near-white of a blanched almond or the best of ivory. A color both sacred—for wasn't it a witness?—and profane: “*he forced my mother my mother/late/ One night/What do they call me?*”).

At fifty-eight Clarice was six years Avey Johnson's junior and the youngest of the three women. Where the bones of her face pressed up through the fleshiness, her skin—black with an admixture of plum that spoke of centuries of sunlight—was as smooth as a girl's. Yet she tended to look as old or older than Thomasina Moore because of the worry lines furrowed deep around her mouth and the downcast, burdened expression she never completely abandoned even on those rare occasions when she laughed.

“Did you hear this?”

“No,” she said, still struggling with the robe. “What's happened?”

Clarice asked but she really didn't want to know. She had already, in a single apprehensive glance around the room, taken in the suitcases by the door, the ransacked drawers and closet and her two friends, one agitated and close to anger in the middle of the floor, the other calm and enveloped in that special intimidating silence of hers over by the porthole; and she had resigned herself to the worst.



“And forget about drinking the water! Remember that place we stopped at last year?”—she half swung toward Clarice again with the same violent movement that jarred the light—“Cartarena or Cartarana or whatever they called it . . .” (It had been Cartagena, Colombia, where, to Avey Johnson’s disgust, the woman had abandoned them to dance in a carnival parade they were watching with other passengers from the *Bianca Pride*. Had gone off amid a throng of strangers swishing her bony hips to the drums. With the slight hump like an organ grinder’s monkey begging pennies from her shoulders. And with their fellow passengers watching. White faces laughing! White hands applauding! Avey Johnson had never been so mortified. And she had returned, the woman, laughing proudly, with the jumpsuit she had on soaked through under the arms, and in her laugh, in her flushed face, something of the high-stepping, high-kicking young chorus

girl she had once been. “Girl, those drums got to me! Where’s some water?”)

“. . . Remember the water they gave me to drink there? You could see the bugs swimming around in it clear as day. Well, just let this one here go running around eating and drinking on her own. She’s gonna come back with her stomach all *tore* up!” (With her colors up she said “tow.”) “A girlfriend of mine went to Mexico for a week and was laid up in the hospital for two months straight when she got back just from drinking a glass of water down there . . .”

The drive from Kennedy to their small section of North White Plains was over. The airport limousine had deposited her at the door and departed. Before leaving, the driver had helped her take the suitcases into the front hall. She could glimpse them through the archway to the dining room where she had gone to sit for a moment in the welcoming dark, at the great oval-shaped table. Where the light from the hall fell across the table's polished surface, the cherry wood glowed like a banked fire that had awaited her return. Over on the buffet the coffee service on its chased and footed tray was a study in silver and black in the semidarkness. Everything was as she had left it: her special crystal in the china closet, her silver-plate—all eighty pieces—in its felt-lined case. It was her favorite room, the dining room. She was right not to go back on her promise to Jerome Johnson and sell the house as Marion kept nagging her to do. (According to Marion, the house had served its purpose.) Later, she would make herself a cup of tea and drink it here at the table in the half-light.



“. . . No decent person'd do a thing like this. Why she's no better come to think of it than some bum on a Hundred Twenty-fifth Street, never mind the airs she gives herself. But she never had me fooled. Oh, no, this is one boot she couldn't play for a fool. I could tell her airs were nothing but a front. Always knew she had it in her to pull somethin' mean and low-down like this. Knew it!

“That's why,” she cried, her suppressed fury at a new high, her breath sucked deep into the bony wells at her throat, her eyes convulsed. “That's why if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times: it . . . don't . . . pay . . . to . . . go . . . no . . . place . . . with . . . *niggers!* They'll mess up ever' time!”

Unhurriedly, Avey Johnson bent and picked up first her gloves and then her pocketbook from the chair beside her. To her surprise she found she was smiling. A little faint, pleased, self-congratulatory smile, as if, instead of the insult, the woman had said something complimentary. It didn't make sense. Yet there the smile was, its warmth stealing across her

face, its gentle pull easing the strain from the held-in lip that had become a permanent part of her expression over the years. To hide the smile she was forced to remain bent over the chair longer than necessary.

Avey Johnson had ceased dreaming after that.

And then three nights ago the old habit returned. Tired after a long day spent ashore on Martinique, during which she and her companions had traveled overland for hours to visit the volcano, Mount Pelée, she had gone to bed early that evening, only to find herself confronted the moment she dropped off to sleep by her great-aunt Cuney.

The old woman, who had really been her father's great-aunt, was someone Avey Johnson couldn't remember ever having dreamed of before. She had scarcely thought of her in

years. Yet there she had been in her sleep, standing waiting for her on the road that led over to the Landing. A hand raised, her face hidden beneath her wide-brimmed field hat, she was motioning for her to come on the walk that had been a ritual with them during the Augusts she had spent as a girl on Tatem Island, just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater.



At least twice a week, in the late afternoon, as the juniper trees around Tatem began sending out their cool elongated shadows, her great-aunt (who resembled the trees in her straight, large-boned mass and height) would take the field hat down from its nail on the door and solemnly place it over her headtie and braids. With equal ceremony she would then draw around her the two belts she and the other women her age in Tatem always put on when going out: one belt at the waist of their plain, long-skirted dresses, and the other (this one worn in the belief that it gave them extra strength) strapped low around their hips like the belt for a sword or a gun holster.

“Avatara.”

There was never any need to call her, because Avey, keeping out of sight behind the old woman, would have already followed suit, girding her nonexistent hips with a second belt (an imaginary one) and placing—with the same studied ceremony—a smaller version of the field hat (which was real) on her head. To protect her legs from the scrub grass and brush along the way she was made to wear wool stockings despite the heat and her high-topped school shoes from last winter, which her mother always sent along for her to finish out the summer in.

Thus attired, they would set out, her great-aunt forging

The old woman (she had been young then) had been caught "crossing her feet" in a Ring Shout being held there and had been ordered out of the circle. But she had refused to leave, denying at first that she had been dancing, then claiming it had been the Spirit moving powerfully in her which had caused her to forget and cross her feet. She had even tried brazening it out: "Hadn't David danced before the Lord?" Finally, just as she was about to be ejected bodily, she had stormed out of the circle and the church on her own. The ban had been only for the one night, but outraged, insisting still on her innocence, she began staying away from the Ring

Shouts altogether. After a time she even stopped attending regular church service as well.

People in Tatem said she had made the Landing her religion after that.

Some nights, though, when they held the Shouts she would go to stand, unreconciled but nostalgic, on the darkened road across from the church, taking Avey with her if it was August. Through the open door the handful of elderly men and women still left, and who still held to the old ways, could be seen slowly circling the room in a loose ring.

They were propelling themselves forward at a curious gliding shuffle which did not permit the soles of the heavy work shoes they had on to ever once lift from the floor. Only their heels rose and then fell with each step, striking the worn pineboard with a beat that was as 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.



It was only a matter of minutes then before they were standing, the forest behind them and the river at their feet, on the long narrow spit of land, shaped like one of Mr. Golla Mack's walking sticks, which marked the point where the waters in and around Tatem met up with the open sea. On the maps of the county it was known as Ibo Landing. To people in Tatem it was simply the Landing.

"It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing. Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened. The small boats was drawed up here and the ship they had just come from was out in the deep water. Great big ol' ship with sails. And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it.

And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power-to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and

things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. Those Ibos didn't miss a thing. Even seen you and me standing here talking about 'em. And when they got through sizing up the place real good and seen what was to come, they turned, my gran' said, and looked at the white folks what brought 'em here. Took their time again and gived them the same long hard look. Tell you the truth, I don't know how those white folks stood it. I know I wouldn't have wanted 'em looking at me that way. And when they got through studying 'em, when they *knew* just from looking at 'em how those folks was gonna do, do you know what the Ibos did? Do you . . . ?”

“I do.” (It wasn't meant for her to answer but she always did anyway.) “Want me to finish telling about 'em? I know the story good as you.” (Which was true. Back home after only her first summer in Tatem she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers, complete with the old woman's inflections and gestures.)



“. . . They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em—” she would have ignored the interruption as usual; wouldn't even have heard it over the voice that possessed her—“and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. Every las' man, woman and chile. And they wasn't taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping! And they didn't bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here—boats take too much time. 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 Ibos none. Neither iron. The way my gran' tol' it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but she never paid 'em no mind) '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. And when they got to where the ship was they didn't so much as give it a look. Just walked on past it. Didn't want nothing to do with that ol' ship. They feets was gonna take 'em wherever they was going that day. And they was singing by then, so my gran' said. When they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving 'em no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing. You could hear 'em clear across Tatem 'cording to her. They sounded like they was having such a good time my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos . . ."



She always paused here, giving the impression she was done. A moment later though would come a final coda, spoken with an amazed reverential laugh: "Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here!"

"But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?"

She had been ten—that old!—and had been hearing the story for four summers straight before she had thought to ask.

Slowly, standing on the consecrated ground, her height almost matching her shadow which the afternoon sun had drawn out over the water at their feet, her great-aunt had turned and regarded her in silence for the longest time. It was to take Avey years to forget the loo

field hat, the disappointment and sadness there. If she could have reached up that day and snatched her question like a fly out of the air and swallowed it whole, she would have done so. And long after she had stopped going to Tatem and the old woman was dead, she was to catch herself flinching whenever she remembered the voice with the quietly dangerous note that had issued finally from under the wide hat brim.

"Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your mamma always sends with you?"

"No, ma'am."

"I din' think so. You got any more questions?"

She had shaken her head "no."





## Ibo Landing: The Legacy of Resisting Enslavement

In 1803 Igbo captives (also Ibo or Ebo) from West Africa revolted while on a slave ship in Dunbar Creek. It is believed that at least ten Igbo drowned, choosing death over enslavement. The Gullah Geechee, descendants of enslaved West Africans along the southeastern US coast, passed down the story of the Igbo's suicide through oral tradition. The tradition, illustrated by the Igbo saying, "The water brought us here, the water will take us away," highlights the use of water as a means for the enslaved Igbo to escape back to Africa. Many works by prominent African-American authors and artists feature similar stories of water or spiritual flight as symbols of resistance. A portion of Dunbar Creek, west of this location, is still referred to as Igbo or Ibo Landing.

Erected by the Georgia Historical Society,  
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The story that gives Ebos Landing its name is one of the most colorful and enduring tales in Georgia's rich literary history. Better known as the "Myth of the Flying Africans," this narrative has been told and embellished for 200 years in the form of local legends, children's stories, movies, novels, and television shows. Based on an actual historical event, this remarkable tale of an Ebo (also known as Igbo or Ibo) slave rebellion on St. Simons Island has become a powerful metaphor of African American courage, longing, and conviction.

The historical roots of the flying Africans legend can be traced back to the spring of 1803, when a group of Igbo slaves arrived in Savannah after enduring the nightmare of the Middle Passage. The Igbo (from what is now the nation of Nigeria, in central West Africa) were renowned throughout the American South for being fiercely independent and unwilling to tolerate the humiliations of chattel slavery. The Igbo who became known as the flying Africans were purchased at the slave market in Savannah by agents working on behalf of John Couper and Thomas Spalding. Loaded aboard a small vessel, the Igbo were confined below deck for the trip down the coast to St. Simons. During the course of the journey, however, the Igbo rose up in rebellion against the white agents, who jumped overboard and were drowned.

What happened next is a striking example of the ways in which African American slaves and white slave masters interpreted "history" in starkly different terms. One of the only contemporary written accounts of the event was by Roswell King, a white overseer on the nearby plantation of Pierce Butler. King recounted that as soon as the Igbo landed on St. Simons Island, they "took to the swamp"—committing suicide by walking into Dunbar Creek. From King's perspective the salient feature of the story was the loss of a substantial financial investment for Couper and Spalding.

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ebos-landing>

African American oral tradition, on the other hand, has preserved a very different account of the events that transpired that day. As with all oral histories, the facts of the story have evolved as storytellers elaborated the tale over the years, such that there are now dozens of variations on the original episode. In the late 1930s, more than 100 years after the Igbo uprising on St. Simons, members of the Federal Writers Project collected oral histories in the Sea Islands (many of which can now be found in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*). An older African American man by the name of Wallace Quarterman was asked if he had heard the story of Ebo's landing. Quarterman replied:

Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and . . . Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good. . . . Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then . . . rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa. . . . Everybody knows about them.

This account of transforming the hardships of slavery into the magical powers of freedom has been retold by a distinguished array of African American artists throughout the last century. Virginia Hamilton and Julius Lester rendered the tale for children. Julie Dash celebrated the memory of Ebo's Landing in elegant visual terms with her film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Perhaps most important, Nobel Prize–winning writer Toni Morrison used the myth of the flying Africans as the basis for her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977).

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ebo-s-landing>





*Igbo Landing*, painting by LaRue  
(Dee Williams)

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In *Daughters of the Dust*, *Mama Day*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, we encounter the parallel myths of the Ibo Landing and that of the flying Africans, powerful myths of resistance. In fact, the myth of the Ibo Landing is so powerful that, in the course of research for *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash found out that almost all the Sea Islands have an area claimed as the "real" Ibo Landing (*Making* 30). Consequently, this is an essential aspect of Sea Islands culture, and so Dash has used it at a central point in her film when she makes an intertextual reference by quoting Marshall's presentation of it in *Praisesong for the Widow* (Screenplay 67–68). All three authors imaginatively recreate the myths of the Ibos and the flying Africans, thus further attesting to their potential as metaphorical markers of an autonomous and assertive cultural sense of self. *Daughters of the Dust* takes place at Ibo Landing, indicating the close association between the myth and the Peasant family's reality. In *Mama*



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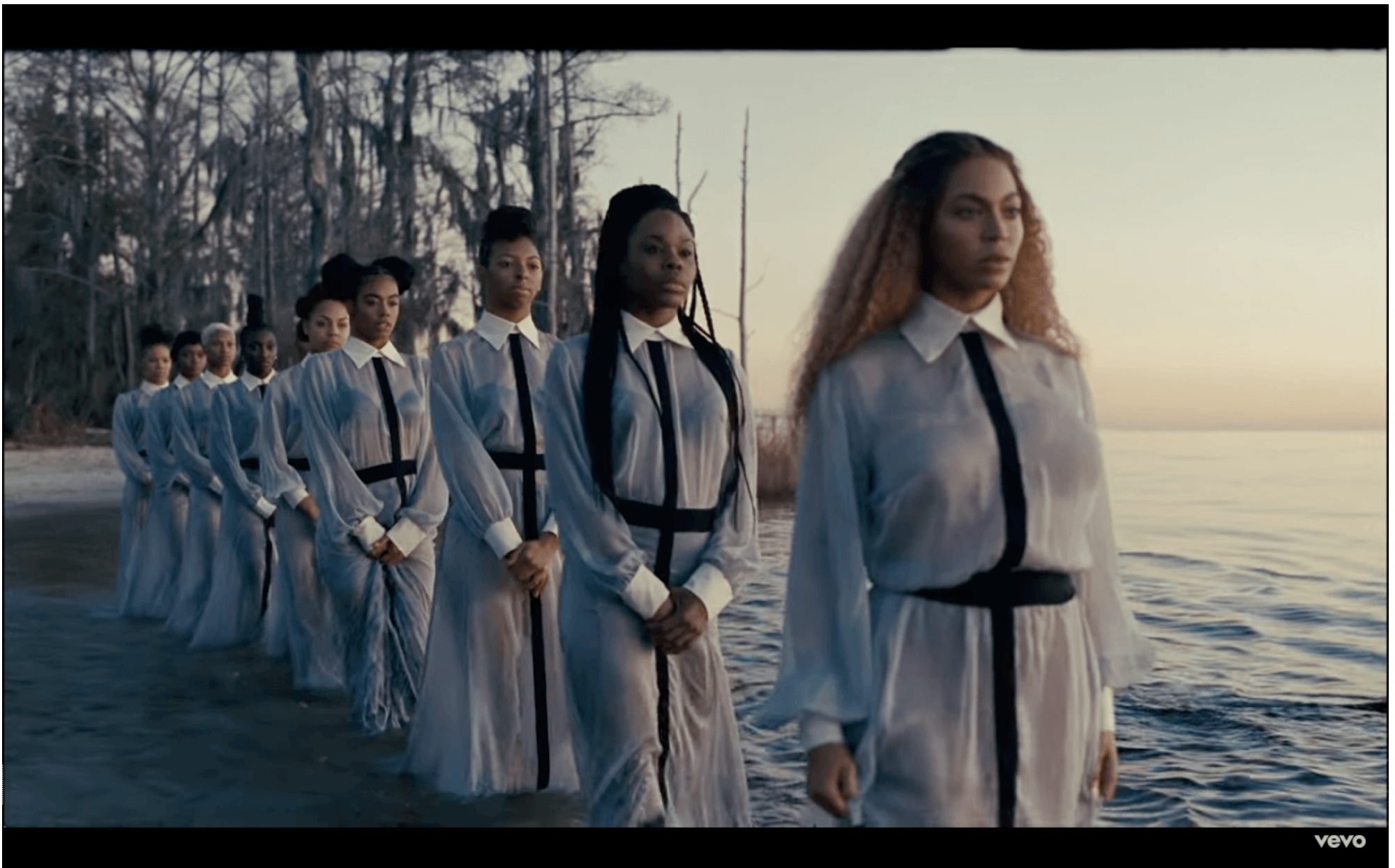
On Carriacou, the drum, combined with the music and dance, is the mythic memory of Africa and of the loss of wholeness. The function of storytelling therefore gains a slightly different function in *Praisesong* than in the previously discussed works. In *Praisesong*, storytelling puts words to the mythic memories expressed through music and dance. Ultimately, Aunt Cuney's recollection of the Ibos tells the same story as the drum-beat, and they both come from the innermost chamber of the collective, mythic memories of the heart. Storytelling, song, and dance thus function as historical records by defining and keeping alive the essence of the past. In other words, they connect the African diaspora to history, tradition, self, and community. After Avey—or Avatara—fully realizes this during the Beg Pardon, she consequently reconfirms her maternal ancestor Avatara's spiritual connection to Africa when she vows to pass on her story: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos" (254–255).



The story of flying Africans has been passed down from generation to generation since slavery—a secret, suppressed gift of our ancestors. While this myth has evolved over the years, it continues to be the source of imagination that depicts freedom, new futures, and returning to Africa. Rooted in the history of Igbo Landing—a site on St. Simon’s Island, in Georgia, where enslaved people brought from Nigeria revolted and walked together into the marshy waters, rather than be sold into slavery—these stories became both a truth that enabled survival and an oral archive of resistance. Flight became a secret language for runaway slaves, and it continues to represent black mobility toward liberation.

Sophia Nahli Allison, “Revisiting the Legend of Flying Africans,” *The New Yorker* 2019  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/revisiting-the-legend-of-flying-africans>

I began to think about stories that no longer have an oral history. I spent time in archives, and questions started to unfold. What do the archives sound like? What secrets do they hold? Archiving is rooted within colonial practices of preservation; black women and girls have historically been erased from these records. My search deepened as I wondered where the suppressed dreams and histories of black women went. “Historians imprison themselves through their reliance on documents they deem factual,” the historian and scholar Tiffany Ruby Patterson said. “My own training in African history taught me that it is possible to reconstruct the consciousness of a people who left scant written records but had a rich oral tradition.” Patterson’s words gave me much needed hope, to continue the journey of dreaming up a story that was no longer easily accessible.



Still from Beyoncé's Love Drought Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUyQSKe75L4>



Like Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange, Marshall uses the Sea Islands as a space both real and imagined. This imaginative vision allows these authors, through fiction, to provide an answer to Countee Cullen's question "What is Africa to me?" By writing an African-informed space as a seat of feminine power specifically useful for black American women, these authors are able to get away from problematic, primitivizing, or essentializing uses of Africa. Like Hurston's anthropological writings, these authors' novels are deeply invested in specifics and diversity of African Americans and their varied African inheritances. Accordingly, those on the excursion to Carriacou represent many nations of African origin, each with its own dance. This work of treating Africa as historically grounded and of dismantling stereotypes of Africa as a timeless monolith clearly still needs attention in the late twentieth century. Marshall and her contemporaries use the Sea Islands as a bridge, a sacred space, from which to do this work.

The further Avey strays from Tatem, the further she is from a cultural nationalism or diasporic consciousness that allows her to feel at home. Marshall introduces Avey in this state of unease, long after her last visit to Tatem, when she is figuratively homeless. According to Lebert Joseph, whom she meets in Grenada after abandoning her annual Caribbean cruise with friends, Avey is one of the "People who can't call their nation." Joseph leads her to Carriacou, site of the Beg Pardon and Big Drum dances. Joining an annual excursion to this island off the coast of Grenada, Avey learns to answer the question that haunts the novel: "What's your nation?" (167). Carriacou and the cleansing journey to the island

Courtney Thorsson, "Dancing Up a Nation: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," *Callaloo*, 30, 2 (Spring, 2007), pp. 644-652

Marshall's unification of individual and community is crucial, as is the unification of mind and body for Avey's performance of a Juba-style dance on Carriacou. In her article "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," Barbara Christian writes, "The recurrent motif throughout 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 that forced displacement of blacks in the West" (75). Audre Lorde, on the other hand, demands unification of mind and body in her essay "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde describes "dancing" as one manifestation of the "creative energy empowered" that women must reclaim in uniting mind and body (55). Both critics are right. Avey Johnson can sort through her past only by mentally leaving her body on several occasions in the novel. As Christian notes, in the section titled "Sleeper's Wake," the action occurs in Avey's mind while her body is in a Grenadian hotel (77). With her mind free to travel, Avey recalls her life, including sacred moments like childhood boat rides on the Hudson River, visits to Tatem, and dancing in the living room with her husband, Jay. A temporary disconnect between Avey's mind and body is, as Christian suggests, an important tool that allows Avey to sift through her history to gather up a usable past. Key to this usable past, however, is a reunification with the erotic, as Lorde would define it, particularly in Avey's recollections of the physical sensation of "threads" that connected her to all the others riding on boats up the Hudson (190) and of making love with Jay early in their marriage, an act which turned her to an African goddess: "Erzulie [. . .] Yemoja [. . .] Oya [. . .]" (127).



While a compelling argument in support of cultural (re)memory and reclamation, I would suggest that the idea of Marshall's text as an heraldic praisesong, an authentic testament of unmediated African continuity, is also problematic because it posits an original (read: "lost") identity as the foundation upon which all else is constructed.<sup>2</sup> For blacks in the diaspora, this process is made that much more complicated because what this requires is the retrieval of what may, in fact, be an imagined/idealized community that elides the tensions of the historical past, the present moment, and heterogeneous, often conflicting, forms of cultural affiliation. Reading *Praisesong* through a trajectory based on a spiritual and moral elevation, informed by an illustrious African past, creates a symbolic hierarchy of original, authentic African culture and inauthentic, white capitalist/consumerist culture—despite the creolization at

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Caroline Brown, *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art*, 2012



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the book's core—that threatens to freeze this binary in place, silencing the contradictions, of class and national consolidation, of power and collusion, that contribute to a comprehension of the work's postmodern subtext. Instead, I would propose that as much as *Praisesong* glorifies both a vibrant African past and the resilient hybrid cultures that have developed in the wake of New World slavery, it is simultaneously an act of mourning and retrieval, acknowledging the demands of the dead for recognition. Using the postmodern body as a site to develop the idea of a sacred hunger that must be fed, it offers—to once again quote Wahneema Lubiano—“history as sloppily and inconsistently, but saliently, present in this moment” (161). It thus reinscribes what we know as history, forcing the reader into his or her own ritual process towards a revised epistemology.

Caroline Brown, *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art*, 2012

The importance of the diaspora motif cannot be underestimated in *Praisesong for the Widow*. The motif engages tropes of Africa in Black Arts literature, while it enunciates Marshall's goals of linking "the two great wings of the black diaspora," which she first suggested in "Shaping the World of My Art," in 1973. It is no coincidence that the ancestral figure chosen to guide Avey is a deity worshipped by people not only in Haiti, as the Vodun Introit suggests, but also in West Africa, parts of South America, and southern portions of the United States. The connections Marshall demands between African American and West Indian cultural and historical experiences are no longer extratextual, dependent on the relationships readers can make between her novels in the trilogy, but are located within the novel proper as Avey experiences life in the United States and Grenada. African American memories and Caribbean experiences coalesce to remind her, and the reader, of cultural practices that link diasporic blacks as descendants of African slaves in the Western hemisphere.

Lisa Diane McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation*, New York UP 2005