



Manifestations of Ogun Symbolism in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Abstract

Paule Marshall uses a West African cosmology in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) to color the physical and spiritual journey of the protagonist Avatara "Avey" Johnson. This cosmology is visible through the presence of African orishas (deities). Though Marshall references other orishas in the novel, including Legba, Erzulie, Yemoja, and Oya, she underscores Ogun by utilizing symbolism related to him throughout the novel. Extending the critical discourse on *Praisesong*, this article elucidates Ogun's appearances by examining Marshall's skillful employment of Ogun symbolism within Avey's journey. This article further argues that in addition to invoking Ogun because of his association with deeds of "destruction and creation," Marshall uses Ogun because he is a totemic figure of conquering transitions, and Avey is in a state of transition from destruction to recreation over the course of the novel.

Keywords: Ogun, orisha, Yoruba, literature, Paule Marshall

Paule Marshall's third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), is part of a body of fiction that features traces of African spiritual traditions in the African diaspora.¹ This group of works has inspired literary scholars to engage in substantive explorations of the significance and role of African-centered cosmologies in African diasporic literature.² Resting in the center of Marshall's corpus of fictional narratives, *Praisesong*, like her other novels, celebrates the vitality of African diasporic culture by following the life of a sixty-four-year-old African American protagonist, Avatara "Avey" Johnson. Marshall uses West African cosmology to color the physical and spiritual journey of the protagonist,

who migrates between the United States and Caribbean. This cosmology is primarily visible through the presence of African orishas (deities).³ Orishas are a vibrant part of many African and African diasporic religious traditions, as these spiritual beings intervene in the everyday lives of their followers. This article examines the presence and significance of a specific orisha, Ogun, in Marshall's *Praisesong* by explicating the various overt and disguised references to him. Though Marshall references other orishas in the novel, including Legba, Erzulie, Yemoja, and Oya, she underscores Ogun, utilizing symbolism related to him throughout the novel.⁴ Her deliberate naming of Ogun during the final climactic scene affirms the centrality of Ogun to Avey's journey and the organization of the narrative.

Despite the growing body of scholarly criticism on Marshall's *Praisesong*, detailed analyses and descriptions of Ogun in her text remain noticeably absent. Only a few scholars focus precisely on the African religious inheritances in *Praisesong*. Barbara Christian's foundational analysis and the more recent analyses by Elizabeth McNeil, Karen Keim, and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted are examples of the illuminating scholarship in this area. Christian argues that "ritual is at the novel's core," and she traces the various rituals throughout the narrative, including the intimate rituals between Avey and Jay.⁵ She also describes *Praisesong* itself as "an African ritual that shows the relationship between the individual and the community," and notes that each of the "sections of the book, is a ritual in itself."⁶ In a similar vein, McNeil highlights the African-based Gullah seeker's initiation rite. She argues that *Praisesong* is a Gullah initiation journey and that "the phases of the Gullah initiate's, or seeker's journey, exactly correlate to the phases of Avey Johnson's metaphysical transformation."⁷ Focusing directly on religious figures in *Praisesong*, Keim analyzes the presence of Legba, who is the orisha of the crossroads.⁸ Similar to other scholars, Keim notes that Legba, through the guise of the character Lebert Joseph, helps Avey reconnect with her African heritage.⁹ She asserts that Lebert is the trickster figure in the novel and also the "agent of transformation."¹⁰ Indeed, Legba is a crucial part of Avey's transformative journey. Yet, Lindberg-Seyersted overstates the case in concluding that "the Legba figure is the *only* African god that plays a significant role in this novel."¹¹ According to multiple scholars, Legba and Ogun both represent particular aspects of the Supreme Being, so discussing Ogun's transformative role in the narrative ultimately unveils another way in which Marshall reflects divine presence in Avey's journey.¹²

Expanding interpretations about the metaphysical presences shaping the novel, this article builds on previous scholarship, particularly concerning the role of the Ogun orisha in *Praisesong*. Readers unfamiliar with Ogun, who “is popularly known as the god of hunting, iron, and warfare,” may not be aware of his presence in the novel until Marshall mentions his name in the final part.¹³ However, Ogun is present throughout: this article elucidates his earlier appearances and extends the critical discourse on *Praisesong* by investigating Marshall’s skillful employment of Ogun symbolism within Avey’s journey, which acts “as a structural device” in the novel.¹⁴ Ogun’s association with deeds of “destruction and creation” is not the only reason Marshall draws on him.¹⁵ She also invokes him because he is a totemic figure of conquering transitions, and Avey is in a state of transition, to borrow Wole Soyinka’s terminology in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, from “dissolution” (or destruction) to “reintegration” (or re-creation) over the course of the novel.¹⁶ Soyinka argues that “no other deity in the pantheon correlates so absolutely, through his own history and nature, with . . . the abyss of transition” and that “Ogun is the first protagonist of the abyss.”¹⁷ Thus, Marshall weaves Ogun symbolism into the very fabric of the narrative by drawing on both specific images and general philosophical principles associated with Ogun. A reading of the novel that takes into account the importance of Ogun not only gives depth to the perceived diasporic manifestations but also offers a way of reading that is grounded in an African cultural worldview.¹⁸ Ultimately, recognition of Ogun symbolism heightens the significance of Avey’s journey and its allegorical meaning, as Ogun represents empowerment to conquer seemingly insurmountable transitions or challenges through the power of one’s will; in Avey’s case, the challenge is to reconnect with her cultural heritage.

To interpret the Ogun symbolism in *Praisesong*, I employ, in a broad sense, the methodology that Georgene Bess Montgomery outlines in her book *The Spirit and the Word* to read the embedded African-derived signs and symbols in literature, a methodology she calls the Ifá paradigm. “This paradigm,” she explains, “examines ways in which the *Orísa*, ancestors, colors, numbers, conjurers, conjuring, divination, initiation, ritual, [and] magic are manifested in Caribbean and African American literary texts and demonstrates how to identify and decode signs and symbols central to Ifá located in the texts.” Thus, the Ifá paradigm is based on the belief that certain imagery, symbolism, and thematic references in African diasporic literature are deliberate references to African culture, and it outlines those specific realms of knowledge

(colors, myths, etc.), allowing critics to deliver an enriched and African-centered critique of the literature. Without this knowledge, readers fail “to see the profound spirituality” in African diasporic literature, and, as a result, “African spirituality is often misunderstood and/or consequently unrecognized.”¹⁹ The Ifá Paradigm is useful for the purposes of my argument because it helps to identify the African cultural symbolism that Marshall strategically weaves into the novel, and thus allows us to evaluate more fully the intricacies of Avey’s journey.

Depicting transformation in each part, *Praisesong* follows the life of Avey, a widow who has renounced her African-based cultural traditions in the course of moving up the socioeconomic ladder in U.S. society. Avey abruptly abandons the luxurious *Bianca Pride* cruise-ship vacation she is on with her two friends after having a disturbing dream about her great-aunt Cuney. Unable to immediately catch a flight back to her home in suburban North White Plains, New York, Avey has to stay in Grenada, where eventually she meets Lebert Joseph, a proprietor of a rum shop. After Lebert persuades Avey to accompany him on the “Carriacou Excursion,” which is an “annual excursion of spiritual rejuvenation,” she begins to see connections between the cultural traditions in Carriacou and those from her youth in Tatem, South Carolina, that she has long abandoned.²⁰ Following the excursion, Avey vows to reconnect with the cultural heritage that she and her deceased husband, Jay, had disowned and to share the traditions with future generations.

As the title of the opening part of the novel, “Runagate,” suggests, Avey is running away from something and on the verge of a transition, and the Ogun symbolism in this part is present during the troubling moments that ignite her desire to flee. Employing the Ifá paradigm in the analysis of this part of *Praisesong* reveals that Marshall imbues the geographical settings and the characters with elements under Ogun’s domain, such as physical combat, the woods, and roads/automobiles (particularly taxis). In the opening pages of the novel, readers meet Avey as she frantically packs her suitcases, planning to escape her cruise-ship vacation. Her agitated state of mind is apparent: “Her mind in a way wasn’t even in her body, or for that matter, in the room” (10).²¹ After having a disturbing dream about her now-deceased Aunt Cuney, Avey is unable to think clearly, and readers learn that the dream is a major factor in her decision to leave the cruise.

Ogun symbolism pervades Marshall’s description of this dream, a dream in which Avey physically fights with Aunt Cuney and that ultimately initiates

Avey's (spiritual) transition, as Avey develops an "odd discomfort" (52) that does not subside until the final part of the novel. In *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, E. Bolaji Idowu documents a popular saying common among followers of Ogun:

Where does one meet him?
One meets him in the place of battle;
One meets him in the place of wrangling.²²

If one meets Ogun in the places of "battle" and "wrangling," then Avey meets Ogun in this scene. Using battle imagery, Marshall describes Avey's refusal to respond to Aunt Cuney's beckoning in the dream: "[Avey] would stand her ground then! Refuse to take even a single step forward! To ensure this, she dug her shoe heels into the dirt and loose stones at her feet. A battle, she sensed, had been joined" (41). These lines appear at the beginning of the scene that details the dream and convey that Avey is adamant in her decision not to join Aunt Cuney on "the walk that had been a ritual with them during the Augusts she had spent as a girl on Tatem Island" (32). Paying homage to their African ancestors, Aunt Cuney would tell the young Avey the story about the Africans at Ibo Landing who escaped slavery by walking back to Africa across the ocean waters. Aunt Cuney, "in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, . . . had entrusted her with a mission" (42), yet at some point during the years of her pursuit of material comforts, Avey stopped recounting the story and abandoned the mission of passing on the Ibo Landing history and all its related cultural affiliations.²³

Additional Ogun symbolism adorns the dream, as Avey finds herself "being dragged forward in the direction of the Landing" (43) by Aunt Cuney. Avey becomes enraged that she is being treated like "a balky mule to be hauled off somewhere against its will!" (43). According to Soyinka, "Ogun is embodiment of Will, and the Will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man."²⁴ Exercising her will, Avey continues to refuse Aunt Cuney's request. Avey's rage ultimately reaches a tipping point in the dream when her fur stole falls to the ground:

The next moment, her outraged cry broke the silence, and she was raising her free hand, the fist tightly clenched, and bringing it down with all her force on the old woman. Wildly she rained the blows on

her face, her neck, her shoulders and her great fallen breasts—striking flesh that had been too awesome for her to even touch as a child.

Her great-aunt did not hesitate to hit her back, and with the same if not greater force. While firmly holding her wrist with one hand, she began trading Avey Johnson blow for blow with the other. Moreover, as if the fallen stole had also triggered a kind of madness in her, she began tearing at the spring suit, the silk blouse, the gloves. The tug-of-war was suddenly a bruising fist fight. (44–45)

At this point in the dream, the scene is one of destruction, as Avey and Aunt Cuney transition from a “tug-of-war” to what Gary Edwards and John Mason in *Black Gods* claim is symbolic of Ogun—“all-out-fighting.” Remember here that, as Edwards and Mason put it, “Ogun is the Orisa of War,” and although no guns are involved in this fight, Marshall’s use of the term “war” in this scene is instructive.²⁵ Furthermore, Aunt Cuney’s ripping of Avey’s clothing speaks to her disdain for Avey’s materialism. In the dream, Aunt Cuney is trying to convince Avey to shed her materialistic lifestyle, emblemized in this instance by Avey’s attire and fur stole, and to recover the heritage of which Avey was once so proud. Like so many others who have examined this novel, Eugenia Delamotte recognizes that “by leaving the mirage of this materialism behind, Avey can arrive at the opposite pole of African and African-American spirituality.”²⁶ The end of the dream, however, suggests Avey is not close to that “opposite pole” just yet.

At the end of the dream, Marshall highlights Avey’s reason for being dressed up and makes yet another reference to Ogun. Briefly stopping her fight, Avey hears “the impatient blast of a car horn” (45). Jay, waiting in his car, honks to get Avey’s attention so that they will not be late to the “annual luncheon at the Statler given by [his] lodge” (40) at which they would be celebrating his “having been made a Master Mason” (45). Edwards and Mason disclose that Ogun is connected with Masonic lodges, representing “professions that form guilds or tightly knit fraternities in which secret, internal information about these valuables and sources of power is passed down from one generation to the next.”²⁷ Donald Cosentino, supporting the claim about Ogun’s connection to Freemasonry, writes that “because of Ogou’s work at the forge and his military leadership, many *oungans* [Vodou priests] claim that the deity was a Freemason.”²⁸ Like Ogun, Jay has Masonic membership. From the beginning to its end, the dream invokes Ogun symbolism.

Even before the fighting in Avey's dream, Marshall imbues the geographical setting of the Ibo Landing with Ogun imagery. Marshall centers the setting on a noted locale within Ogun's domain—the woods and forests. In *Santería, the Religion*, Migene Gonzalez-Wippler informs us that “Ogun lives in the woods and is said to represent the woods themselves.”²⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, too, asserts that “the cutlass of Ogun ennobles space, opening roads and village clearings in the forest,” while Soyinka affirms Ogun is highly associated with the road, being dubbed the “guardian of the road.”³⁰ The wood/forest imagery is underscored in the description of the walk Avey and Cuney used to take: “The first leg of their walk took them along the road which bordered the large wood belonging to their neighbor, Shad Dawson” (33), and “the forest marked the final leg of their journey” (37). At the middle point of the walk to the Landing, however, was a married couple's house with “not a single flower or herb or blade of grass” (35). Instead, Pharo Harris and Miss Celia “had piled their dusty yard and the porch to the house with all the rusted washtubs, scrubboards and iron kettles from the years she had taken in washing and all the broken plows, pitchforks, hoes and the like from his sharecropping days” (35). According to Edwards and Mason, “Ogun lives in iron,” and he uses “blacksmiths' tools, farmers' tools, [as well as] hunters' tools.”³¹ Although Pharo and Celia's yard does not resemble the woods or forest, it too, with the many scattered iron elements, brings to mind Ogun.

A change comes over Avey after her dream about Aunt Cuney and her recollection of her summers at Ibo Landing; she becomes what Soyinka calls “the ritual protagonist on the edge of [a] transitional gulf.”³² Not only does Avey question herself and her surroundings, but she becomes more unsettled, which is evidenced by a “mysterious clogged and swollen feeling which differed in intensity and came and went at will” (52). Even after she wakes, Avey continues to feel “something of the pressure of the old woman's iron grip” (47). The rest of Avey's body, too, feels sore “as if she had actually been fighting; and all during the day, in the dim rear of her mind, she had sensed her great-aunt still struggling to haul her off up the road” (47). Later, on board the ship, Avey imagines the shuffleboard games turning “into a spectacular brawl, with the players flailing away at each other with their cue sticks—just as in the hockey games . . . [with] the padded Neanderthal men clubbing each other with the murderous sticks” (56). The terms “brawl,” “flailing,” “clubbing,” and “murderous” all connote fighting and violence. Additionally, Avey is startled by a trapshooting game on the sports deck of the cruise ship, where an old lady

takes aim, as if she is hunting, at a clay pigeon with a “twelve-gauge, open-bore shotgun” (57), a weapon under Ogun’s domain.³³ In response, Avey “recoiled as violently as if the old woman with the gun had turned in the next instant and fired it at her” (57). At the end of her stay on the cruise ship, Avey, though unaware of Ogun’s supernatural presence at the moment, recognizes something has come over her: her eyes “retained the look of someone in the grip of a powerful hallucinogen—something that had dramatically expanded her vision, offering her a glimpse of things that were beyond her comprehension, and therefore frightening” (59). Sensing that “she was being pursued” (58), Avey begins to transform, which is indicated by the opening of her (spiritual) eyes.

After finally escaping the cruise ship, Avey takes a launch to the nearest island, which happens to be Grenada, where she must stay at a hotel until a flight becomes available. There, a taxi driver, in the guise of an Ogun figure, “clears the path” for Avey to the hotel.³⁴ Emerging boldly in this scene, the Ogun symbolism is connected to Avey’s spiritual renewal and reconnection with her cultural past. However, before Avey meets the taxi driver and while she is leaving on the launch from the cruise ship, she “turned only to have her eyes assaulted by what looked like a huge flash fire of megaton intensity and heat, as the tropical sunlight striking the liner’s bow and sweeping over the hull appeared to have set it ablaze” (63). Once she slightly shifts her gaze from what appears to be “fires on the decks” (63), the image disappears. Later, she imagines returning to her home in North White Plains “to find everything there reduced,” like the museum artifacts from the erupted Mount Pelée volcano, “to so many grotesque lumps of metal and glass by a fire like the one she had seen raging aboard the liner for an instant that morning from the launch” (83). According to Sandra Barnes in her introduction to *Africa’s Ogun*, there is a manifestation of Ogun as “‘Ogoun La Flambeau,’ god of war and fire,” and Idowu adds that Ogun’s “eyes are said to be like flames of fire.”³⁵ With this information, we can read this fire imagery as signifying the dissolution or burning up of Avey’s past, and the taxi driver helps propel her forward to re-creation.

From the start of the taxi scene in *Praisesong*, Marshall represents Ogun through the taxi driver. The physical description of the taxi driver is reminiscent of Ogun: “He might have stepped off the pages of the expensive photography book with the word ‘Masai’ on its cover which Marion kept in her living room. A warrior without his spear and leaning stick, without his shield, wearing mirror sunglasses and a straw ten-gallon hat” (73). Gonzalez-Wippler

discloses that Ogun wears “a large straw hat,” and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell reveals that “the Yoruba recognize him by his ‘title staff,’ a wooden stick on which is carved a figure of him.”³⁶ Furthermore, Renato Ortiz cites the lyrics to a song about Ogun in which these kinds of objects are mentioned: “He carries a shield on his arm, / His sword on his belt, / and a spear in his hand.”³⁷ Together, these descriptions mirror the taxi driver’s appearance.

As the taxi driver approaches Avey, more Ogun symbolism appears. When he sees Avey, he comes “bearing down on her from the roadway with the smile that had the plan behind it,” and he picks up Avey’s suitcases with “a long, lean, beautifully articulated hand” (73). The description here reflects a line from a song about Ogun that refers to his “long hands,” which “can save his children from the abyss.”³⁸ True to these lyrics, the taxi driver, in the guise of Ogun, has a plan to help Avey so that she can emerge from the abyss of cultural disconnection. Moreover, several scholars note that because Ogun presides over the domain of anything iron related, which includes automobiles, taxi drivers seek him for protection.³⁹ To be sure, Barnes notes that Ogun’s sphere has come “to include many new elements, from modern technology to highway safety—anything involving metal, danger, or transportation.”⁴⁰

The taxi driver exhibits other qualities associated with Ogun. While he is explaining to Avey the actions of the people going on the Carriacou Excursion, we can see, when armed with background information on Ogun, that he possesses character traits similar to Ogun. At one point, the conversation alludes to Ogun when the driver mentions his ex-girlfriend, Sylvie, who is an out-islander (someone who lives off the island). His relationship with Sylvie ended because every year he refused to accompany her on the Carriacou Excursion, and “he was saying for the third time that it was ‘only this excursion business I don’ understand” (79). The taxi driver’s refusal to attend the annual event that draws large crowds is in line with Ogun’s character, as scholars reveal that “Ogun often lives a solitary, confined life when in society because he has limited social skills.”⁴¹ Furthermore, Cosentino confirms Ogun has a “frustrated libido” and “does not have a female partner.”⁴² Later, during the taxi driver’s conversation with Avey, “a streak of stubbornness surface[s]” in him (77), recalling Ogun’s “stubbornness.”⁴³ Also, while talking to Avey, the driver is listening to “country-and-western music” (75), which is another evocation of Ogun, who is “symbolized by the mountain man,” the quintessential hunter/explorer.⁴⁴ Focusing on a music genre that often references the exploits of cowboys in the American West, Paul Kingsbury explains that a

number of country music artists have referred to themselves as mountain men or boys throughout the history of the genre. For example, the famous country western music singer James Edward Arnold is identified as a “mountain man” with “outlaw ways.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, Marshall uses Ogun symbolism in the first part of *Praisesong* to initiate Avey’s transition, and the taxi driver “clears the path” to her next destination, where she meets Lebert Joseph.

Providing a flashback in the form of a dream to Avey’s younger life when she was married to her now-deceased husband, part 2 of the novel, “Sleeper’s Wake,” exposes through Ogun symbolism the havoc in her life that causes Avey to stop practicing her cultural traditions. Staying at a hotel in Grenada while waiting for a flight back home to North White Plains, Avey dreams about her life on Halsey Street in a working-class community many years ago. In this dream, readers perceive that Avey was once well connected to her heritage but that she abandoned these connections as she moved up to a higher socioeconomic class. At one point, Avey is indeed passing on traditions, sharing, for example, the Ibo story with Jay on their vacations to the South. In fact, Jay has a positive response to the Ibo Landing story: “I’m with your aunt Cuney and the old woman you were named for. I believe it, Avey. Every word” (115). However, “the yearly trip south became a thing of the past following that Tuesday in the living room” (116). In this part, we see the beginning of Avey’s spiritual journey of dissolution and the need for her to reembrace her cultural heritage.

Demonstrating the destroyer side of Ogun, or what Barnes labels as a “terrifying specter,” “a violent warrior, fully armed and laden with frightening charms and medicines to kill his foes,” this part portrays the destruction of a family via an infamous Tuesday and the characterization of Jay.⁴⁶ In their description of orishas, Montgomery and Caribbean culture scholars Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert disclose that specific days, foods, numbers, materials, professions, and colors are associated with each orisha.⁴⁷ Significantly, the imagery evoking the falling apart of Avey’s life begins on a Tuesday, the day associated with Ogun.⁴⁸ Avey and Jay’s marriage is alive and well until a particular “Tuesday evening in the winter of ’47” (89), when Avey, pregnant at the time with their third daughter, accuses Jay, with a “knife edge in her voice” (104), of cheating.⁴⁹ In a rage, Avey shouts the same line they hear weekly coming from the unhappy couple living down the street from their apartment building: “*Goddamn you, nigger, I’ll take my babies and go!*” (106, emphasis in original).

Avey's words bring Jay to a halt, and his reaction is described in terms that invoke Ogun's battling sides of destroyer and creator. Jay stands in shock:

As he stood there straining to make his escape, another force equally strong held him in place and even seemed to be trying to nudge him toward them. His anguished face, his eyes under the hat with the melted snow on the crown and brim reflected the struggle. He was like an embattled swimmer caught in the eye of two currents moving powerfully in opposite directions. That Tuesday night it was impossible to tell which one would ultimately claim him. (111)

Marshall's use of the "two currents" phrase suggests that the "embattled" Jay struggles between leaving, and thus destroying his family, and staying, and continuing to build his family. Though he physically stays, the novel reads, "perhaps he had left after all" (136), implying that Jay leaves emotionally, and this Tuesday marks the destruction of Avey and Jay's relationship. After this day, Avey and Jay no longer share the affectionate and passionate moments they used to. Jay immerses himself in his jobs and schoolwork, and he brings his unopened check to Avey every week as proof that he is not spending his money on another woman. This "Tuesday in the living room," when Jay was "harnessing both his body and his will" (114), is mentioned repeatedly throughout the rest of part 2. Love is a burden for Jay, as he is portrayed in Avey's dream, after this Tuesday; love becomes "like a leg-iron which slowed him in the course he had set for himself" (129). Though blacksmithing is a creative act that produces the leg-iron, here it symbolizes the way Jay's marriage becomes a weight that restricts and eventually destroys him.

Besides using Ogun symbolism to convey the disintegration of Avey and Jay's marriage in this part of the novel, Marshall also represents Ogun through the character Jay, who embodies some of Ogun's qualities. According to several scholars, including John Pemberton III and Funso Afolayan, Ogun is the protector of barbers because they use iron utensils, and he is in control of those who cut hair.⁵⁰ Before the infamous Tuesday, Jay had an infatuation with his mustache, a "full, broad-winged mustache, . . . sported around World War I," which he had perhaps adopted "as a kind of tribute" (93). Obsessed with cutting and grooming his hair, Jay keeps a tortoiseshell rake and scissors in the medicine cabinet to keep his mustache nice and trim. Even after all of the daily attention he gives his mustache, Jay still travels on "the subway back to his

old neighborhood in Harlem to have it properly trimmed and groomed by his favorite barber" (93). Also, Marshall's reference here to a major war connects to "Ogun, [who] is the father of the army," and foreshadows her mentioning of Jay serving in the army (114).⁵¹ After the couple's move to the suburban neighborhood of North White Plains, "Jay shaved off his mustache" (130) and "with it shaved off he had lost a necessary shield. He was as exposed and vulnerable suddenly as a prizefighter who had foolishly let drop his guard" (131). In this part and in these lines specifically, we see again terminology connected to Ogun's fighting nature, such as "shield," "fighter," and "guard," as well as his association with barbers.

Avey is not only upset over "the change" with Jay's mustache but also "distressed and uneasy" about the many other changes in Jay (130). Ogun's warrior nature (portrayed as destructive in this instance) is visible in Jay, as he becomes very coarse and abrasive. Emphasizing Ogun's temper, John Mason describes Ogun as having an "explosive and fiery nature, oftentimes ritually symbolized by the ignition of gunpowder."⁵² After that infamous Tuesday, he becomes "someone who from the remarks he made viewed the world and his fellow man according to a harsh and joyless ethic" (131). He is no longer sympathetic to the struggles of his fellow African Americans and accuses them of not working as hard as he does and of "always looking for the white man to give them something instead of getting out and doing for themselves" (131). Even more than a change in his behavior, Avey senses a change in Jay's face:

On occasion, glancing at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure. It was the most fleeting of impressions, something imagined rather than seen, and she always promptly dismissed it.

Nonetheless, there it was every so often, this strange pallid face, whose expression was even more severe and driven than Jay's, looming up for a subliminal moment over his familiar features. (131)

The earlier transformations of Jay that are suffused with Ogun symbolism help readers to discern that Marshall is suggesting here that the "even more severe and driven" face that appears for "a subliminal moment" superimposed on Jay's face is Ogun. Indeed, throughout *Praisesong*, there are "subliminal moments" of Ogun.

As she dreams, Avey grieves over Jay's pain and the life he has before he suffers a stroke, mumbling words as he is dying from that Tuesday that brought about their marriage's spiritual death. Later, recalling his funeral in her dream, Avey sees, "staring up at her from Jerome Johnson's sealed face," "that other face with the tight joyless look which she had surprised from time to time over the years. Jerome Johnson was dead, but it was still alive; in the midst of his immutable silence, the sound of its mirthless, triumphant laughter could be heard ringing through the high nave of the church" (133). In these lines, Marshall portrays Ogun laughing at the death he causes. Characterized as heartless sometimes, Ogun, according to Idowu, is "a very ferocious being who was addicted to the savage sports of hunting and carnage," and Gonzalez-Wippler adds, "he is the father of tragedy, a symbol of all the pain and horror caused by war and violence."⁵³ At the close of her dream about Jay, Avey thinks back on the times when she desired "to take to the streets with an avenging sword" (129) to fight for her husband, and she releases "a hint of the angry, deep-throated cry she might have uttered as she rushed forth slashing and slaying like some Dahomey woman warrior of old" (130). In contrast to the earlier funeral images, this final description celebrates the warrior/avenger personality of Ogun that Avey displays.

Reinforcing Ogun's role as "conqueror of transition," the third part of the novel, in which Legba symbolism also plays a central role, depicts Avey's cleansing process and transition to renewed life.⁵⁴ Focusing on religious inheritances, the very title of this part—"lavé tête"—which refers to a Vodou cleansing ritual, reminds us of Ogun's presence in the different places within the African diaspora. As Karen McCarthy Brown explains, Ogun is specially revered in Haiti, and "he is one of the most important spirits of African origin who is venerated in the Vodou religious system."⁵⁵ In fact, some proclaim Ogun is the preeminent orisha in Haiti.⁵⁶ *Lavé tête* is a Vodou ritual meant to cleanse a person from past negative experiences or energy and bring forth spiritual blessings by the "washing of the head"—its literal translation from French.⁵⁷ Marshall's reference to a Haitian religious system in which Ogun is central, despite the scene's setting in Grenada, exemplifies Marshall's commitment to diasporic connections and underscores Avey's need for spiritual renewal. However, as Dorothy Denniston points out, "although Haitian and other Caribbean materials are woven throughout *Praisesong*, the artist is concerned with American materialism and how upwardly mobile black people can fend off its spiritually debilitating effects."⁵⁸ In this part, Avey, who is an upwardly

mobile Black, undergoes a cleansing so that she can reembrace her cultural inheritances.

Equally significant, Ogun and Legba are individual orishas whose symbolism manifests during Avey's journey to reconnect with her cultural heritage. In his discussion of the religion of the Yoruba in *African Traditional Religion*, Idowa declares that it "can only be adequately described as monotheistic" and that orishas, including Legba and Ogun, are manifestations of the Supreme Being.⁵⁹ While Legba performs a mediating function of opening the path between humans and the other orishas, Ogun clears the path.⁶⁰ To be sure, as Margaret Drewal explains, Ogun "facilitates Elegba by 'clearing the way.' . . . Elegba and Ogun work hand in hand."⁶¹ Here, Drewal's explanation of the connection between Legba and Ogun in the spiritual realm clarifies the presence of Legba and Ogun symbolism in *Praisesong*.

Marshall conveys the partnership between Legba and Ogun most blatantly in this third part of the novel. Thompson explains that orishas are "messengers and embodiments of *ashé*," which he defines as "spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen," and Idowu confirms that the Supreme Being sends orishas to effect change in the physical world.⁶² The change at this point in Avey's life is imbued with references to Ogun and Legba. Awakening from the dream about Jay, Avey wanders to Lebert Joseph's rum shop, and he persuades her to change her flight plans and join him on the excursion where they will participate in the Big Drum, a celebration for the ancestors. Joyce Pettis observes that "the process of Avey's regeneration demands a live ancestor for its completion [and] in many ways Lebert Joseph becomes Aunt Cuney's live counterpart."⁶³ Yet, while Avey is in Lebert's shop, "the taxi driver's voice came to her faintly over the gulf that had opened in her mind," offering a reminder of Ogun (162). Marshall also recalls Ogun's earlier act of clearing the path for Avey through the guise of the taxi driver, describing Avey "as slow and clumsy as a two-year-old just learning to walk" (151), as she unconsciously walks in the direction where "just above the treeline hung the bluff along which she had traveled in the taxi yesterday" (153). As Avey continues to walk, "a change came over her. . . . [and] she felt the caul over her mind lifting" (154).

At the rum shop, the connection between Ogun and Legba becomes noticeable in Lebert's actions. Lebert is rude when Avey first enters his rum shop, which is closed for business at the time. Eventually, Lebert relaxes and decides to make Avey a drink. He goes behind the counter and begins to hack at something using a machete—one of Ogun's weapons—"with a long blade

gleaming in the dimness" (173).⁶⁴ When Avey tastes the drink, Lebert admits that he has put a little Jack Iron rum in it as well. This drink initiates Avey's internal physical cleansing, "even causing the caul over her mind to lift again" (174). Shortly after Avey boards the Emanuel C schooner to Carriacou, her body begins to purge, a needed physical cleanse that is symbolic of her spiritual cleansing: "As her mind came unburdened she began to float down through the gaping hole, floating, looking, searching" (197), recalling the abyss of transition Soyinka describes.

Marshall also appropriates Ogun's domain of iron by using metal imagery to describe features of Lebert. Lebert has a "cast-iron heart," and his muscles and bones appear to be "tempered to the consistency of steel" (161). At the end of Avey and Lebert's talk, Avey "felt as exhausted as if she and the old man had been fighting—actually, physically fighting, knocking over the tables and chairs in the room as they battled with each other over the floor—and . . . he had proven the stronger of the two" (184). This scene invokes yet another battle and conjures Avey's earlier dream about Aunt Cuney that featured a similar fighting scene. After Avey agrees to accompany Lebert on the excursion, "a car that also served as a taxi" appears outside (185). Here, the taxi that "materializes" recalls the taxi driver from earlier. In the end, Marshall describes Lebert as one of those old people who can live forever due to their "indestructible will" (161). Remember here Soyinka's declaration that Ogun is the embodiment of will and that "nothing but the will (for that alone is left untouched) rescues being from annihilation within the abyss."⁶⁵ Avey is in a precarious transition, and her will ultimately is the deciding factor in her own resurrection. The Ogun symbolism in this part of the novel largely involves her transition from the destruction of the past as Avey purges her painful history.

"The Beg Pardon," the concluding part of the novel, derives from the segment in the Big Drum ritual where people ask forgiveness of their ancestors, and it is the part of the novel where Marshall names Ogun outright and confirms his ability to pave the way to new life. Readers witness a completion of the *lavé tête* that began in the third part, as Rosalie Parvay, Lebert's daughter, and her maid Milda perform what McNeil describes as "the initiating rite of baptism" for Avey.⁶⁶ Moreover, Marshall invokes another prominent trope within Black women's literary traditions by calling it "a laying on of hands" (217). In her essay of the same title, Joanne V. Gabbin explains the laying on of hands act and uses it as a metaphor for the work of Black women writers: "The practice represents the transmission of a miraculous power that heals,

restores, and transforms.”⁶⁷ After the *lavé tête*, Avey is officially prepared for the new awareness the Big Drum brings, and besides physically appearing, Ogun becomes visible throughout the celebration via iron-related tools.

Undeniably, the Big Drum celebration in Carriacou sets the stage for the appearance of Ogun and the climax of Avey’s renewal. Marshall meticulously creates a scene that mimics the real-life Big Drum ritual, according to Lorna McDaniel’s *The Big Drum Rítual of Carriacou*.⁶⁸ As this section of the novel continues to unfold, there is a peak in the references to Ogun, and iron imagery is abundant. A woman with “iron-gray braids” (237) initiates the nation dances that pay homage to the African ancestors, and a number of young people bring “cowbells and hoe blades which they were either shaking or beating with spoons” (242) to add to the music and summon the spirit world.⁶⁹ One young man “in a red T-shirt” appeared “carrying the heavy iron hub of a car wheel . . . with a thin metal rod” (242).⁷⁰ “Iron,” the narrator tells us, is “lending its authoritative voice” (142). Connecting Ogun to music, Soyinka writes that the “ritual summons, response, and expression [of the titanic resolution of the will] is the strange alien sound to which we give the name of music.”⁷¹ This statement alludes to the significance and place of music in rituals of transition. Shortly after, Marshall delivers the big reveal—Ogun himself:

Clangorous, insistent, soaring, the iron was sending out a call loud enough to be heard from one end of the archipelago to the other. Iron calling for its namesake and creator. Until after a time the call was answered. Those among the elderly who, like Lebert Joseph, possessed *connaissance* could tell. They sensed a presence squatting in the darkness beyond the reach of the gas lamps. Ogun Feraille.⁷² Taking his nightly stroll around the islands he had heard the sound of the gong-gong and dropped in. (246–47)

Readers who did not recognize Ogun’s symbolism throughout the novel certainly become aware of his presence when Marshall includes his name in this scene. Aligning with Gonzalez-Wippler, who notes that “Eleggua is the first orisha to be honored in all the ceremonies,” this part shows Ogun manifesting only after Avey meets Legba, in the guise of Lebert, at the crossroads (230).⁷³ Legba, the orisha of the crossroads, is invoked first, before other orishas, at a ritual ceremony, according to many scholars, including Maya Deren in *Divine Horsemen*, who also observes that Ogun Feraille is celebrated

as a national hero connected with revolutionary power.⁷⁴ Coming full circle, the narrative, like the cyclical pattern of life/creation and death/destruction, concludes with Avey being restored, as “she had finally after all these decades made it across” (248).

After Ogun is named in this final part, Avey propels forward into the beats and sounds of the Big Drum celebration, doing the “flatfooted glide and stamp with aplomb” (248). Avey’s joining in the dance follows Ogun’s entrance on the scene and is the beginning of Avey’s newly committed life. Invoking Ogun again before dancing, Avey remembers “the taxi driver two days ago as he came hurrying to rescue her from the crowd” (242). The rescue is complete, and when an older woman asks her name, she remembers what Aunt Cuney says: “Avey, short for Avatara” (251). Concerning Avey’s reclamation of her name and her full discovery of herself, Barbara Waxman writes that “the ancestral threads linking Avey and her black kinfolk become reinforced steel bonds.”⁷⁵ Moreover, reciting her name in this manner shows that Avey understands its importance. Avey’s name, Avatara, stems from the word “avatar,” meaning incarnation of a deity. Before Avey was born, Aunt Cuney had a dream that Avey would be the reincarnation of her grandmother Avatara—the one who taught Cuney about Ibo Landing. As a result, Avey inherits the name Avatara and becomes an avatar of her ancestors. Here, Marshall implies that supernatural beings can significantly influence a person’s life.

Coming to a close, the narrative culminates with Avey reconnecting with her heritage and responding to the call to carry on her cultural legacy. Thinking ahead, Avey reveals that the taxi driver is among the first people she would like to tell about her experiences, but she plans to first remove his “straw cowboy hat” (254). This allusion demonstrates that Ogun further provides revolutionary potential to the narrative through Avey’s actions once she is resurrected. Now “restored to her proper axis” (254), Avey can utilize the revolutionary power she exhibited during “her days as an organizer for the union on her job” (256). Avey promises to teach future generations and to tell people not only about the Ibos but also about the excursion and her life on Halsey Street to help them remember their ancestors and keep “a necessary distance of the mind” (255), which Christian writes is “a source of wisdom.”⁷⁶ Avey’s ability to see the connection between her past, especially Aunt Cuney’s Tatem, and Lebert’s Carriacou empowers her to take these steps. As a young girl, Avey attended church services with Aunt Cuney where they performed the Carriacou tramp, a dance similar to one performed at the Big Drum. She reunites with the life

she had in Tatem, South Carolina, through Carriacou, as West African cultural vestiges are present in both of these diasporic locations. In *Praisesong*, a reading of Ogun symbolism affirms that Ogun is an orisha who “clears the way” so that there can be a successful passage from destruction to re-creation.

Like Ogun, Avey becomes “a challenger of the transitional abyss.”⁷⁷ Ogun, the embodiment of will, is associated with the way Avey is empowered, enabling her to reconnect with her community. Furthermore, what is central to the success of Avey’s passage over the gulf or “yawning hole down which her life of the past thirty years had vanished” (172) is her will. Thinking back over her life, she now realizes that she and Jay could have “preserved their heritage,” even though “it would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess” (139). Avey’s journey serves as an example for those in the African diaspora who are disconnected from their heritage or, as Lebert says, “who [have] never been to a Big Drum” and “who don’ know nothing ‘bout the nation dance” (168). Life is a battle, the narrative suggests, but it is still possible to transcend life’s limitations. In concluding her narrative, Marshall uses Ogun symbolism to signify life, healing, and restoration as readers see Avey’s vow to support and strengthen her community.⁷⁸

In *Praisesong*, Ogun symbolism, including the philosophical associations of creation/destruction and conquering transitions, is apparent in the structure, characterization, and scenes. Marshall resists the religious (or cultural) imperialism that extends from the history of slavery by using material from African-centered religious traditions. A goal of this article has been to expose Ogun’s sphere of influence on Avey’s life, a life that Marshall illustrates is symbolic of any individual’s life and of everyone’s potential to utilize the power within. In the end, *Praisesong* audiences can understand and believe Marshall’s claim that “all of [her] stories, in fact, have to do, essentially, with a search for empowerment, whether personal, social or political.”⁷⁹ Ultimately, *Praisesong* itself becomes a teaching tool for learning about Ogun, and Marshall’s use of Ogun symbolism in *Praisesong* conveys her earnest effort to educate and remind readers of African cultural inheritances in the diaspora.

Notes

1. My use of the descriptor “African diaspora” refers to the displacement Africans underwent during slavery from West Africa to North America, South America, and Caribbean nations and the transmigration of African cultural residuals in

these geographic spaces. See Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Erna Brodber's *Myal*, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, Tarell McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams*, Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*. These literary works are merely representative of a more exhaustive list. Additionally, references specifically to Ogun appear in fiction by other authors such as Migene González-Wippler and Alex Abella. See Donald J. Cosentino, "Repossession: Ogun in Folklore and Literature," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, 2nd ed., ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 296–97, for more on Ogun in literary works.

2. Over the last decade in particular, the academic world has witnessed a proliferation in publications on the presence of African thought systems in the literature. Some scholars such as Elizabeth West (*African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature and Being* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011]) and Judylyn Ryan (*Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005]) focus more expansively on various African philosophies and principles that influence literary artists, while other scholars such as Kameelah Martin (*Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013]), Georgene Bess Montgomery (*The Spirit and the Word: A Theory of Spirituality in Africana Literary Criticism* [Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008]), and Teresa N. Washington (*Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Ajé in Africana Literature* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005]) underscore more specific subjects such as the role of spiritual figures or the function of African orishas.
3. Common translations for the term "orisha" are "deity," "divinity," or "god." Some refer to these beings simply as the "orisa." The names of the specific orishas also have various spellings.
4. Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 127; hereafter, references to the novel will be made parenthetically in the text.
5. Barbara Christian, "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," *Callaloo*, no. 18 (Spring–Summer 1983): 74.
6. *Ibid.*, 83, 77.
7. Elizabeth McNeil, "The Gullah Seeker's Journey in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," *MELUS* 34, no. 1 (2009): 186.
8. Legba (Fon) is also known as Eshu-Elegbara (Yoruba).
9. Additionally, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown ("The Journey as Crossing," in *The Trickster*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby [New York: Chelsea House, 2010], 169–86) connects Lebert to Marshall's theme of continuity and argues that he is a trickster and helps Avey complete her "spiritual return to Africa" (184).
10. Karen R. Keim, "Revelation through Trickery: Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux Negre et la Medaille* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," in *Tongue and Mother Tongue: African Literature and the Perpetual Quest for Identity*, ed. Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith and Daniel P. Kunene (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 193.

11. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *Black and Female: Essays on Writings by Black Women in the Diaspora* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994), 51, emphasis mine.
12. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Heinemann, 1990), 74–77; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983); E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (New York: Praeger, 1963).
13. Sandra T. Barnes, introduction to Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 2.
14. Billingslea-Brown, "Journey," 178.
15. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 150. Several other scholars note Ogun's association with creation and destruction. See Barnes, introduction, 16–19; John Pemberton III, "The Dreadful God and the Divine King," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 107, 124; Adeboye Babalola, "A Portrait of Ogun as Reflected in Ijala Chants," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 155–66; and Henry John Drewal, "Art or Accident: Yoruba Body Artists and Their Deity Ogun," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 235–38.
16. Soyinka, *Myth*, 30. Soyinka writes that Ogun experienced "the first active battle of the will through the abyss," and he reveals this was an "experience of dissolution and re-integration" (*Myth*, 149).
17. Soyinka, *Myth*, 26, 158. Soyinka recounts a very popular myth that describes how Ogun earned the reputation for conquering transitions: when the gods became separated from the humans on earth by an impenetrable void or gulf, Ogun, by the power of his will, "plunged through the abyss and called on the others to follow," and he became "the embodiment of challenge" (*Myth*, 29, 30). Other scholars also recount this myth: see Idowu, *Olodumare*, 85–86; Mbiti, *African Religions*, 75; and Migene González-Wippler, *Santería, the Religion: A Legacy of Faith, Rites, and Magic* (New York: Harmony Books, 1982), 47.
18. Explaining the need for African-centered literary criticism, Montgomery writes that "perhaps there is a lack of literary criticism because many scholars pay little attention to the spirituality embedded in those texts because their approach to, definition of, and paradigm for spirituality is Western oriented" (*Spirit*, 3).
19. Montgomery, *Spirit*, 3–4.
20. Christian, "Ritualistic," 75.
21. See Christian for a discussion on the mind/body motif in the novel. She reveals that ultimately the separation is wise but that Avey has not yet learned how to control the separation.
22. Idowu, *Olodumare*, 89 (emphasis added).
23. The Ibo Landing story in *Praisesong* is a variation of the flying Africans tale, which authors such as Morrison, Kincaid, and Bambara invoke in their fiction. For more information on tales of flight in African American literature, see Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* 16, no. 1 (1989–90): 21–32.
24. Soyinka, *Myth*, 150.
25. Gary Edwards and John Mason, *Black Gods: Òrìṣà Studies in the New World* (Brooklyn, NY: Yorubá Theological Archministry, 1998), 24. Ogun is behind the destructive

- activities of fighting and war, and earlier in the Ibo Landing scene, Marshall invokes famous words from a general in the Union Army during the American Civil War: “*War is cruelty and you cannot refine it*: General William Tecumseh Sherman on his march of blood and fire up from Atlanta” (36, emphasis in original).
26. Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 100.
 27. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 27.
 28. Cosentino, “Repossession,” 304.
 29. González-Wippler, *Santería*, 45.
 30. Soyinka, *Myth*, 140. Robert Farris Thompson, “The Three Warriors: Atlantic Altars of Esu, Ogun, and Osoosi,” in *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts*, ed. Rowland Abiodun, John Pemberton III, and Henry J. Drewal (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 229. See also Barnes, introduction, 8.
 31. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 21, 22.
 32. Soyinka, *Myth*, 140.
 33. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 25.
 34. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 23–24; and Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería*, 47.
 35. Barnes, introduction, xvi; and Idowu, *Olodumare*, 87.
 36. Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería*, 47; and Nathaniel S. Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 34. Murrell (388) also notes Ogun’s stick or staff is called Iwana. The leaning stick Marshall describes here should not, however, be confused with Legba’s walking stick, which is also mentioned in *Praisesong* (228, 233).
 37. Renato Ortiz, “Ogum and the Umbandista Religion,” in Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun*, 97. Remember here, too, that when she dressed for the Ibo Landing walk, Aunt Cuney wore a second belt “strapped low around [her] hips like the belt for a sword or a gun holster” (32).
 38. Pemberton, “Dreadful,” 106.
 39. Thompson observes that Ogun “is the not-so-secret deity of present-day Nigerian Yoruba drivers of taxis and lorries” (“Warriors,” 232).
 40. Barnes, introduction, 2.
 41. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 25.
 42. Cosentino, “Repossession,” 303, 294.
 43. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 24.
 44. *Ibid.*, 25.
 45. Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.
 46. Barnes, introduction, 2.
 47. Montgomery, *Spirit*, 10; Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 41. See also Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 114.

48. Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert, *Creole*, 41.
49. Edwards and Mason note that "Ogun's symbol is the knife" (*Black Gods*, 21).
50. John Pemberton III and Funso S. Afolayan, *Yoruba Sacred Kingship: "A Power Like That of the Gods"* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 157. See also González-Wippler, *Santería*, 47.
51. Edwards and Mason, *Black Gods*, 25.
52. John Mason, "Ogun: Builder of the Lukumi's House," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 361. Emphasizing Ogun's hot temper, one popular myth tells how he sentenced himself to a life of solitude and isolation after he killed some of his own people in a fit of rage. See Babalola, "A Portrait," 156.
53. Idowu, *Olodumare*, 86; and Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería*, 45.
54. Soyinka, *Myth*, 145.
55. Karen McCarthy Brown, "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogou in Haiti," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 65.
56. Brian Brazeal, "Ogou/Ogoun," in *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 726.
57. Karen McCarthy Brown, "Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study," in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 14.
58. Dorothy Denniston, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 127.
59. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 135.
60. Henry L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.
61. Margaret T. Drewal, "Dancing for Ogun in Yorubaland and in Brazil," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun*, 210. Some scholars discuss partnerships in the spiritual realm and note that Ogun, Legba, and Ocoosi form a trio of warrior orishas, especially within Santería. Maya Deren further notes there are two types of Ogun figures associated with Legba (*Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* [New York: Book Collectors Society, 1953], 132). See also Thompson, "Warriors," 225; Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert, *Creole*, 49; and Murrell *Afro-Caribbean*, 117.
62. Thompson, *Flash*, 5; and Idowu, *Olodumare*, 85.
63. Joyce Pettis, *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 121.
64. Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert, *Creole*, 41.
65. Soyinka, *Myth*, 150.
66. McNeil, "Gullah," 185.
67. Joanne V. Gabbin, "A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition," in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée N. McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 247.

68. Lorna McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).
69. McDaniel, "Big Drum," 22.
70. One of the colors Ogun devotees wear is red; see Cosentino, "Repossession," 300; Brown, "Systematic," 68; and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 140.
71. Soyinka, *Myth*, 149.
72. Ogun Feraille is a Haitian appellation for Ogun in the Petwo (Petro) pantheon (Brazeal, "Ogou/Ogoun," 726; Cosentino, "Repossession," 302). "Feraille" roughly means "scrap iron" in French. Ogun's name appears in a variety of ways, including Gu, Ogu, Ogou, or Ogun, and is sometimes accompanied by a second name (indicating different paths), such as Ogou Senjak or Ogun Belando. For more on variable names and roles, see Idowu, *Olodumare*, and Harold Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (New York: Crown, 1973). Ogun is also syncretized with St. James, St. Peter, and St. George of Catholicism (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole*, 41; Cosentino, "Repossession," 291; Thompson, "Warriors," 234).
73. Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería*, 45.
74. Deren, *Horsemen*, 203.
75. Barbara Waxman, "The Widow's Journey to Self and Roots: Aging and Society in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9, no. 3 (1987): 97.
76. Christian, "Ritualistic," 75.
77. Soyinka, *Myth*, 32.
78. For a thorough discussion specifically on cultural nationalism and *Praisesong*, see Courtney Thorsson, *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
79. Paule Marshall, interview by Michael Silverblatt, *Paule Marshall: Lannan Literary Videos* (Los Angeles: Lannan Foundation, 1994), VHS.