
Cerebrations of Home in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

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Abstract

This paper examines the work of novelist Paule Marshall, whose writings focus on migration, displacement, home, return, and community bonding in the African Caribbean Immigrants in the United States. Paule Marshall's first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), focuses on Selina Boyce, a second-generation Barbadian immigrant from the United States, whose search for her roots is informed by an inherent link to the Caribbean through an articulation of the dynamics of belonging. Marshall grants her protagonist the space to challenge familial struggles, and reclaim her voice by relocating to Barbados, her parental home. The protagonist's enigmatic journey through ambivalent interspaces enables her to reconstruct bridges to the West Indies. Marshall's examination of her young protagonist's 'return to the Caribbean' reflects wider issues of diasporic identity and belonging connected to 'home' spaces, ancestral lands, regions, and origins.

The entire action of the novel is set in New York exclusively while references to the Caribbean home islands narrated by specific West Indian characters are mentioned in the narrative. Hence, the key focus of the paper examines the notion of home from Selina's point of view, reflecting the voice of second-generation immigrants. The paper exclusively deals with Silla and Deighton Boyce's conceptions of home as well, for Selina learns her first

lessons about home/land from them. Selina Boyce, the daughter of Bajan immigrants who came to the U.S. during the first wave of immigration, struggles between her mother Silla's ardent desire to 'buy house' and settle in the United States and her father Deighton's desire of going back to his home island in the Caribbean. Selina, the younger one resists Silla's influence and desire. She establishes her individuality through values connected with her ethnic group, embodied through Silla. Selina displays her potential and strength of character that emerges later in the novel through a series of episodes.

The Barbadian Association in Brooklyn, an organization of property owners and businessmen, believes in acquiring a 'house' as the communal goal of the group leading to their accession of respectability in the New World. The text, in tracing the historical realities of the African Caribbean community, makes allusions to Silla and Deighton, who espouse strikingly different views of the concept of 'home' and a sense of belonging. Barbados, the place of Silla and Deighton's birth, is transfigured in memory, words and nostalgia. Silla's memory of the Caribbean filled with imprints of a colonial past gives an account of hardship, demoralizing poverty and deprivation that has characteristically transplanted her as a woman of survival, will, strength and determination. Silla's struggle to create an existential space for her entire family showcases her strong personality. Belonging to the "Third Class," a poor class in Barbados, she explains to Selina "The Third class is a set of little children picking grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in this heaven till it sunset" and "working harder than a man at the age of ten," her plight painfully evokes the life of black women laborers during slavery (Marshall, 1959, p. 45-46). Despite leaving Barbados, Silla's identification and commitment in being a Bajan woman in America clearly testifies her link with her cultural roots. By cooking and selling traditional Barbadian delicacies, indulging in

conversations and discussions every Saturday around her kitchen table, Silla clings to her Barbadian heritage and history. Through reclamation, she remembers, reconnects, and records her past in the present.

Her sole aim of ‘buying house,’ dedication, devotion and commitment to strive for better economic standing in America helps her gain the community’s likeness and support. The Brownstones where the Boyce family resides, emerges as a significant space for Silla. Silla works extremely hard to attain the ‘brownstone,’ which in fact is ‘home’ for her in this foreign land. Like most of the members of the Association, Silla’s efforts at property ownership is a site of power and celebration of identity, despite the persistence of racial violence in America. But Silla’s drive towards materialism and the values embraced by the members of the Barbadian community allow individual assumptions to differ from a group norm. Selina wishes to conform loyalty to her community’s expectations, but sets her own objectives in achieving her goals. Conditioned by her mother’s and community’s aims to be anchored on the American soil, Selina adopts a strategy quite different from Bellowers’ perspective of immigrant novels “With construction as the master topic, goals are still relatively uncomplicated, cultural motives are few, simple, public in character, and usually agreed upon by all. The ethnic project inspires consensus, and consensus inspires the building of an ethnic community” (as cited in Japtok, 1998, p. 308-309). However, Selina does not cling to this ‘consensus,’ but constructs a world of her own.

Unlike his wife Silla Boyce, Deighton Boyce’s valorization of a past depicts his fancy for Barbados and the home island as a paradise in its totality. His boyhood days, fun-filled life, playing games, and enjoyment mirror his carefree youth. Separated from his island and exiled in New York, he longs to return home. Deighton, carries with him the imprint of

his homeland, as George (1999) has asserted, the idea of home “acts as an ideological determinant of the subject” and “home-country expresses a complex yoking of ideological apparatuses of having a home, and a place of one’s own” (p. 2). Emphasizing their historical and cultural connections to Africa and the Caribbean, many people of Caribbean descent born outside of the Caribbean articulate a Caribbean homeland within the city and cling to nostalgic evocations of their island stories, food, music, traditions, customs, language, and landscapes, thereby repositioning tropes of home and identity, by linking to historical places, the memories or reserves of the past are invoked and relived in the present establishing cultural familiarity and continuity as such, the memory field filled with individual/collective experiences from the past, whether painful or traumatic, provides an insight into history and continues to exercise its influence in the present and subsequent notions of identity, for Deighton, memories of the Caribbean ‘home’ are not merely associated with an ideological past, but linked to his own future projects of building a house on his two acres of land he has inherited. Cherishing to get back to his homeland, he dreams of living in his newly constructed house. Deighton’s Barbadian upbringings, wild fantasies, coupled with his island tales nourish young Selina’s imagination of her ancestral home. In fact, the shared recollections or memories guide an individual to pass on their linkages to future generations.

Deighton is the “model, example, and element of teaching” for his young daughter. Like Deighton, the image of the island is reconstructed by SuggieSkeete, one of the Boyce’s tenants, who clings to her Barbadian culture. Both Suggie and Deighton seek to reconstruct a spatial home that helps them identify their sense of belonging and reconnect to their past “Selina with examples of following the course of life one has chosen for oneself” and thereby “give Selina the warmth, affection, and sense of enjoyment of life that is missing in a

community focused solely on work and acquisition” (Japtok, 1998, p. 309). Deighton’s reveries, dreams, memories, desires, and fantasy of Barbados, propels Selina to discover or invent her unseen home. In Benston’s (1975) view: “Deighton’s land becomes a symbol for the long lost and irrecoverable ‘home’ of Barbados – its simplicity in poverty, slow-paced living, natural beauty, and essential Pre-Lapsarian purity and innocence” (p.68). Sustaining his identity and subsequent return to his origins, Deighton’s link to the lost homeland functions as a site of memory creating a conceptual space mirroring images of Caribbean existence within the racial and global universe.

But Deighton’s ties with his homeland are severed, when Silla secretly sells his piece of land in Barbados, to use the money as down payment for the Brooklyn brownstones. Broken, and dispossessed, Deighton faces death on his deportation, which occurs on Silla’s reporting the police about her husband’s illegal immigrant status. Barbados, the former colonial ‘home,’ recalls a life of an idealized past and nostalgic return, as well as a life of suffering, poverty, and deprivation of the parents. The dichotomous image of home functions as a site of desire and loss, heaven and hell, freedom and bondage, all things embedded in one location. Both Silla’s and Deighton’s visions of ‘home’ delineate the strategies, and accompanying responses that typify the immigrant subject’s experience. Whether Selina adopts her parents’ strategies or sets forth a newer vision of ‘home’ in this narrative is yet to occur.

The Brownstone, which in reality should evolve as a nurturing ground for Selina’s development, fails to prove as a stable and secure haven owing to the constant disputes in the family. Marshall vividly structures Selina’s confrontation with a lack of space as the real-life situations of her family environment set her up on a journey to experience a harsher, hostile

racist urban environment in the episodes that follow. As Selina matures, her confrontations with racism and her retreat from the Barbadian group at Gatha Steed's daughter's wedding feast mark a drastic shift in her character. The wedding feast makes Selina aware of the community's disinterest in the bride's choice, for she is forced to marry a West Indian rather than her love, a southern American black. In failing to keep up with the economic goals of the Bajan community, Deighton is explicitly condemned, while Selina watches the show. The gathering, a collective ritual and communal space intended to display the community's harmony and recognition of their presence makes Selina feel out of place and detach herself from her own West Indian community. The ritual of dance enhances the Barbadian community as a social structure culturally tied to the Caribbean. Rituals extend support for individuals in society, where they recognize, localize and construct bonds. Selina fully recognizes the dangers of community membership and gradually turns and grows independent from them. In fact, rituals offer a space for communities, localities, or groups to carve a place for themselves retaining their rich culture and heritage in spite of being physically dislocated or forcibly uprooted from their native land. Dance as a celebratory ritual helps in perpetuating and preserving customs of a community passed down through generations. It aids in the restoration of communal health providing solace and wholeness to one's bodies and hearts. In other words, dance unites societies to recollect memorable experiences, and it functions as the place where the most acute aggressively and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed, and conjured away. The circles of the dance are a permissive circle: it protects and permits. It reflects the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. There are no limits inside the circle. (Fanon, 1963, p. 57)

The retention of such communal practices reunifies immigrants with their ancestral identities. Remembering, storing, and transmitting these practices helps protect them from the loss of cultural and communicative memory. Cultural practices exercise a dominant force in communities and take a significant role in the process of healing. In addition, the individual is able “to liberate itself” as indicated above for:

Ritual is a bridge by which those of us who have almost forgotten and those of us who know can cross over into remembering who we were, who we are, and who we are intended to become. Ritual can assist us by naming and validating the essential worth of our experience. In our collective search for meaning, relatedness, worth, and assurance, we are anchored by ritual. (Hyman 1993, p. 174)

Through rituals, individuals link to their extended family members and help mend those ruptures caused due to abandoning them. Rituals weave the disconnected/ fragmented portions of one’s life thereby fostering, this perspective is deftly crafted in Marshall’s third novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). It enables the protagonist to survive through the identity crisis, recognize her strengths and promote the rituals.

In this novel, the religious ritual the “laying on of hands” that combines the sensual with the process of spiritual rebirth brings the protagonist closer to claiming her identity as a Black Woman. The ritual generally performed by women, and their effort to heal the body, reflects a cultural tradition preserved by black women through ages. The protagonist’s participation in the rituals on the Carriacou Island connects black West Indians and their African ancestors socially, spiritually, culturally and psychologically, thereby signifying the unity of African rituals from different geographical borders. The Carriacou people keep the traditions alive by narrating, retelling and performing them every year.

Reference

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