

Tracking light in brown girl, brown stones



**ASSIGN
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In Zora Neal Hurston's essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression", she claims that the most notable characteristic of African American expression is drama.

[1] She explains how the black artist's interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures and action, and while the white man thinks in a written language, the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. [2] This sense of theatrical, pictured expression will guide my analysis of Paule Marshall's novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; specifically, my inquisition on how the author uses light imagery to picture and to adorn the quest of selfhood and self-making of her main protagonist, Selina Boyce. This notion of adornment also stems from Hurston's essay on the characteristics of African American aesthetic expression. She claims that the African American's will to adorn has done wonders to the English language and notes that [the black artist's] idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator. [3] In positing this notion of the will to adorn in Marshall's novel, the theatricalized picture of Selina's journey of self-making becomes a reflection of the author's own self understanding and mode of consciousness. Therefore, according to Hurston's principles of black aesthetics, the light imagery used in the novel is inextricably linked to Marshall's own unique black subjectivity. In tracking the way light adorns Selina's process of self discovery, readers will be exposed to Marshall's own process of satisfying her soul and staking her own claim as an American writer.

In following Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's interpretation of black female subjectivity in her essay "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition", the mode of consciousness exposed in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* can be characterized, by what Henderson describes, as "interlocutory, or dialogic," reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)", but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black subjectivity.[4]

The "other(s)" Henderson refers to are the complex intersectionalities of identity in which the black female is not only "other" in terms of race but also "the other" in terms of gender. The multiple dialogues a black woman engages with outside herself then shape the internal dialogue within her self. What Henderson claims, then, is that black women's writing not only speaks to the "other(s)", but also speaks to the inner "otherness" within the writer's psyche. This is what Mikhail Bakhtin would describe as "a unique form of collaboration with oneself", and this form of collaboration is clearly identifiable in Marshall's work in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

[5] Marshall is empowered by her mastery to shape her internal dialogue in the novel and stands in resistance to conventional standards by adorning or theatricalizing the politics of self-making of black female subjectivity. This empowerment and resistance can be traced by the novel's use of light imagery, which organizes the economy of the adornment and pictures the multiple dialogues (both internal and external) that constitute the formation of Selina's self journey. The novel begins by staging Selina as a little girl sitting on the top floor of an old Brooklyn brownstone. She is brightly lit by

the sun shining down on her like a spotlight as she is surrounded by the ??? dust and dimness of the hall???.[6] This presentation introduces Selina to the reader and strikingly resembles the lighting aesthetic of a theatrical stage. Marshall describes how the lighting catches ??? her wide full mouth, the small but strong nose, the eyes set deep in the darkness of her face???.[7] Here, the reader is given a still portrait of Selina??™s face in which the shadows that frame her features are impressed in the reader??™s mind. Following this still portrait, Marshall describes an aged essence within Selina??™s deepened eyes.

Marshall writes, ???[t]hey were not the eyes of a child. Something old lurked in their centers. They were weighted, it seemed, with scenes of a long life.???.[8] The reader, who is also an audience member in the theater of Selina??™s home, is drawn in close to the portrait to move into the darkness of Selina??™s eyes that hold scenes of her previous lives.

These two perspectives, one external that sets the staged scene and one internal that pulls the reader into Selina??™s psyche, represent the duality that takes place throughout the novel. This dualistic positioning highlights both the author??™s urge to theatricalize the scene and to confront interiority simultaneously. And though the theatricality or adornment, which connotes a kind of dramatized, external shell, and the interiorized journey, which is personalized and privatized, may seem at odds with one another, Marshall??™s writing is able to use light imagery to picture the co-existence of these contradictory positionalities. In the final lines of Selina??™s introduction, Marshall continues to play on the drama of the moment, fully opening the curtains of the story??™s stage, yet turning light into a

metaphor that will guide the internal journey Selina will undergo. Marshall writes, ??? She seemed to know the world down there in the dark hall and beyond for what it was. Yet knowing, she still longed to leave this safe, sunlit place at the top of the house for the challenge there.???[9] The challenge, then, entails moving into the darkness, or according to Mary Helen Washington who wrote the novel??™s Afterword, to embrace the darkness in order to find illumination.[10] As the end of the novel reveals, this darkness has much to do with the knowledge she gains from the injurious encounter with a white woman, who forever stains her experiences with white people and taints all the small triumphs to come in her life.

[11] However, as Marshall writes, ??? she must somehow prevent [her encounter] from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge.??? This notion of survival entails Selina facing her own darkness, both of her skin color and her anger that had caused her to deceive many people, including her mother. However, this revelatory discovery is preceded by a complex journey that begins with her descent into the darkness, as she imagines herself fused with the white family who had lived there before her. Marshall describes the scene, ???[s]he rose, her arms lifted in welcome, and quickly the white family who had lived here before??!glided with pale footfalls up the stairs. Their white hands trailed the banister; their mild voices implored her to give them a little life. And as they crowded around, fusing with her, she was no longer a dark girl alone and dreaming at the top of an old house, but one of them, invested with their beauty and gentility.???

[12] As can be gleaned from this passage, Selina??™s journey begins with complex and contradicting elements of light, both metaphorically and

literally, where she steps into the darkness of the hall to shed her own darkness to be whitened in the space of her imagination.

Selina's whitening takes place through what Marshall defines as a fusion with the white family, and this notion of fusing with others to find her own self becomes especially important for Selina, and light imagery is almost always there to picture or adorn moments of identificatory fusion. The two most important characters Selina identifies with are her mother and her father, who are strongly characterized by their relationships to light. Before Selina's father, Deighton, was injured at work, he was almost always described in relation to sunlight. Even, as Marshall writes, "the day [became] suddenly bright with the thought of him".[13] Deighton is depicted as "someone drunk with sun", and the sun parlor, where he spent most of his time, was described as "the one room given over to the sun."

Sunlight came spilling through the glass walls, sway like a dancer in the air and lay in a yellow rug on the floor.[14] In these two passages, Deighton is both imaged and imagined by sunlight, following the pattern set forth in the opening scene. He is imaged within a dramatic spectacle of excessive sunlight, as in the beginning of the novel he is beaming with himself and his prospects of going home to Barbados. He is also, within the confines of Selina's mind, a thought that engenders brightness. In thinking of him, she is filled or fused with his brightness, and she considered him as "the one constant in the flux and unreality of life".[15] On the other hand, Selina's mother, Silla, is first introduced in the novel as bringing "the theme of winter into the park with her dark dress amid the summer green"

[16] In contrast to the brightness and gaiety generated from Deighton, Silla is described as in a permanent protest against life, and in her presence, the sun even gave way to her dark force; the flushed summer colors ran together and faded as she passed by. [17] Though Selina saw her mother as somewhat malicious and impenetrable throughout most of the novel, Selina later recounts her mother's forceful strides through this park on her way home from cleaning the homes of white women. Close to the end of the novel, she re-imagines her mother's stiff, turbulent strides and realizes that her mother was forcefully attempting to shed the layers of humiliation and darkness in order to be able to enter her own home with sanity intact.

Selina becomes fused to her mother when she experiences this same humiliation and is able to share in the knowing and survival of her mother's darkness. In contrast to the dark knowledge borne by Silla, the lighting and spectacular space with which her character was paired was overwrought with an excessive whiteness. Silla was depicted at her most powerful while in her stark white kitchen with its antiseptic white furniture and enameled white walls, which exuded a strange unfeeling world. [18] This whiteness, similar to the sunlight earlier, takes on a double significance in which the whiteness of the kitchen sets the stage for Silla's authority and acts as the space where Selina struggles to know her mother, and the whiteness (meaning cold, stiff, unfeeling) of Silla's person is coming from an interior space within Silla; though it was really an outer shell that had encased her being over the years. Within the sterile, starkly lit space of the kitchen, the room itself, guided by its master, Silla, could create its own

forceful rage. Marshall describes how ??? the white room leaped into violence??? when Silla found out Selina had been seeing Clive.

[19] Also, when it was disclosed to Deighton that Silla had sold his precious land, ???[t]he strands of sunlight impaled Deighton in the middle of the bright-patterned linoleum???.[20] In these two scenes, the kitchen becomes an extended limb of Silla??™s self and feels as she feels or acts as she acts. Here, the scene of adornment, where beams of light slice through Deighton??™s body, is literally a simultaneous stage setting and psychological space working synchronically.

The control Silla had over the forces of the space around her both deplored and fascinated Selina and was, in part, why she felt such a detachment from ??? the mother??™. However, as readers come to see later in the novel, Selina, like her mother, is able to use the forces of light to protect her when she is performing on stage. This scene, literally being a stage, intentionally reflects the introductory stage set at the beginning of the novel.

Here, Marshall describes her as she is dancing and the spotlight highlights her features, ??? the huge eyes in her dark face absorbed yet passionate, old as they had been old even when she was a child, suggesting always that she had lived before and had retained, deep within her, the memory and scar of that other life.???[21] However, a major difference in this scene is that the spotlight no longer fuses her with the white family or the white audience in the darkness that stretches out in front of her. Here, the light ??? cascaded down and formed a protective ring around her???, individuating her.[22] Yet, while dancing inside the protective ring of light, Selina thinks of Clive and

Rachel, and they become another manifestation of the ring of protection. Selina's individuation and coming-into-self is fused with her identification with Clive and Rachel. As can be gleaned from this paragraph, however, Selina's relation to Rachel, in a moment of self-making and individuation, is more heightened; for, as the end of the novel reveals, Rachel represents a force for a new beginning, whereas Clive comes to represent a kind of resignation. The moment where Selina and Rachel become fused together is also represented by a protective lighting where they share their secrets and a moment of intimacy in which they meld into one another. Marshall sets up the stage, this time it being backstage, where the darkness like a high tent around them becomes their safe refuge to come into one another.

[23] She writes, reluctant to leave the dark tent, knowing perhaps their intimacy would end once they left, that the world would separate and drive each into herself again.[24] So as to not lose their connection yet, Rachel asks Selina to let her dance her solo with her, and they leaped together into the arena of light.[25] Selina later describes their dance together as something guided by a single will, as if, indeed, they were simply reflections of each other.[26] In these scenes and moments of reflection (which almost become one and the same thing), the space and the lighting become a part of Selina's self-making, where Selina defines a part of herself through her relation with Rachel then uses it as inspiration and protection in her performance. Other scenes/moments of intimacy that are guided by theatrical lighting and become part of Selina's self-building are those with Miss Thompson. The evening Miss Thompson finally discloses the cause of her foot sore, the stage is set so that they were alone in the

booth with the one dangling light staving off the darkness.???[27] This intimate lighting adorned a kind of rite of passage in which Selina fused with Miss Thompson as a young woman ready to hear, or be illuminated by, Miss Thompson??™s explanation. Marshall dramatizes the moment when she writes, ??? Miss Thompson gave [Selina] a quick, penetrating look, then sat down abruptly??;she lifted her aged sunken face into the harsh light and began talking, quickly, in a voice without emotion.

???[28] As if Miss Thompson already knew how this story would affect Selina??™s life, it was necessary that this story be told adorned by a harsh light to illuminate the darkness of the story. She ends her story with a harsh refusal of any questioning and literally turns off her memory/story by pulling the light chain. Furthermore, while brashly lit by the raw bulb, Miss Thompson??™s penetrating look represented Selina??™s initiation into a place of knowing that would carry her further toward understanding herself. The actual moment Selina becomes ??? one with Miss Thompson??? she is riding the subway after her traumatic encounter with Margaret??™s mother, the white woman who would change the course of Selina??™s life. Marshall describes the scene, ???[a]s the lights along the tunnel wall stabbed into her vacant eyes, she thought of Miss Thompson??;recounting, dispassionately, her story of violation. In each light she saw the shovel cutting like a scythe in the sunlight and, in a way, it was no different from the woman??™s voice falling brutally in the glare of the lamp.???[29] Light imagery acts as surrogate for the violence experienced by both Miss Thompson and Selina.

As in Silla??™s kitchen, the lighting pictured in the subway train worked simultaneously to create a visual spectacle and a display of violence at work

within the psyche. But this harsh, violent light, and the dark thoughts surrounding it, fused Selina to Miss Thompson and to ??? the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know.???[30] This understanding came to her through the interrogation and humiliation she experienced with Margaret??™s mother. Marshall depicts the scene, ??? [i]t was like an inquisition somehow, where she was the accused, imprisoned in the wing chair under the glaring lamp, the woman the inquisitor and Margaret the heavy, dull-faced guard at the door.???[31] Selina is again put under the spotlight, but this time the light imprisons her rather than protects her. The interrogative positioning of the light recalls a history of examination of black Americans by whites and the kind of degradation that experience engenders.

In the midst of this demeaning examination, the light moves its weight from Selina??™s shoulders into the eyes of Margaret??™s mother. Marshall writes, ???[t]hose eyes were a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw-with a sharp shattering clarity- the full meaning of her black skin?? |And knowing was like dying??|And obscurely she knew: the part of her which had long hated her for her blackness and thus begrudged her each small success like the one tonight??|???[32] Here, the light is working on multiple levels where, not only does the stage become a glossy reflection of Selina seeing herself in the mirror of Margaret??™s mother??™s eyes, but the light forces Selina to see her blackness as something deep within her that she had hated and had not understood until this moment. She could not only see her own reflection, she could see within herself; the other within herself whom

she had repressed. This other, perhaps, may have been ??? the life she had lived before and the memory and scar of that other life.

??? The traumatic scene ended in a dramatic flurry where Selina ??? savagely flung??? the woman??™s hand off her and struck the lamp and ??? the darkness exploded in the room???.[33] This darkness was obviously due to the lamp crashing to the floor and the light going out, but, simultaneously, it was symbolic for the immensity of the darkness of the moment. As Selina fled the house, she ran exhaustedly until she was confronted by another mirror: a dirty window under a street lamp. Marshall paints the scene, ??? [t]he meager glow of a distant street light fell aslant the window and, suddenly curious, she held her face to the light??;!She peered shyly at her reflection??;!And, in a sense, it was a discovery for her...

She was seeing for the first time, the image which the woman-and the ones like the woman-saw when they looked at her.???.[34] Moreover, her discovery was more than the others looking at her, it was her seeing herself through the eyes of the others, and then, her seeing deep within herself for who she had become. Marshall writes, ???[a]bove all, the horror was that she saw in that image-which had the shape and form of her face but was not really her face-her own dark depth.???.[35] Through her experience, she was able to see something within herself that didn??™t even look like her. It was someone other within herself who she had discovered.

Selina??™s self discovery was not comprised of her finding the single, individual kernel that was her individual self. Rather, her quest comprised her finding and confronting the multiple voices that made up her self. Her

own individuation was generated through her differences from and her identifications with the people in her life. Marshall writes, "[t]hose faces, those voices, those lives touching hers had ruined her, yet, she sensed they had bequeathed her a small strength. It might be quickly spent and she might fall, broken before her time and still far from the center of life. For that was the quest. And a question flickered in her mind like a reflection of the lights flickering along the street: What was at the center? Selina's final question refuses to close the lid of her quest, as her question opens up a lifelong journey and has no answer. But, what can be gleaned from her final question is that the center is not her.

The center is something much larger than herself, her community, or her place in Brooklyn. And just as the trope of light adorned the many stages of her quest for selfhood, the question that continues to guide her life's journey is embodied within the light that flickers within her mind. This image of a flickering light, as the thought that guides Selina's life, sustains Hurston's claim about the distinct nature of black aesthetics; the black artist thinks in hieroglyphics.

[37] ————[1] Angelyn Mitchell, ed. *Within The Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994) 79.[2] *Ibid.*, 79-80.[3] *Ibid.*, 80.[4] Mae Gwendolyn Henderson.

Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition (New York: NYU Press, 2000) 349.[5] *Ibid.*, 350.[6] Paule Marshall. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: The Feminist Press) 4.[7] *Ibid.*

, 4.[8] Ibid., 4.[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ibid., 320.[11] Ibid., 291.

[12] Ibid., 5.[13] Ibid.

, 8.[14] Ibid., 8.[15] Ibid.

, 8.[16] Ibid., 16.[17] Ibid., 16.[18] Ibid.

, 22.[19] Ibid., 257.[20] Ibid., 112.[21] Ibid.

, 281.[22] Ibid., 281.

[23] Ibid., 279.[24] Ibid., 280.[25] Ibid., 280.

[26] Ibid., 281.[27] Ibid., 214.

[28] Ibid., 215-16.[29] Ibid., 292.[30] Ibid.

, 293.[31] Ibid., 287.[32] Ibid., 289.

[33] Ibid., 290.[34] Ibid., 290-91.[35] Ibid., 291.

[36] Ibid., 308.[37] Mitchell, *Within The Circle*, 80.