

**“You Ain No Real-Real Bajan Man”: Patriarchal
Performance and Feminist Discourse in Paule
Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones***

Lewis MacLeod

As the titles of many of her writings (*Brown Girl, Brownstones, Praisesong for the Widow, Daughters*) might suggest, Paule Marshall’s career has been preoccupied with the concerns and difficulties that women, particularly non-white women, face in American society. Her books have been published by *The Feminist Press*, lauded in feminist and postcolonial journals, and she has rightly taken her place among the important voices in the fiction of African-American and Caribbean-American women.¹ By her own admission, her work is “interested in discovering and unearthing what was [and is] positive and inspiring about [the] experience” of marginalized peoples, and in pursuing “the unique opportunity to create, to reinvent” (“Interview” 5) cultural and individual understandings of those peoples. As such, her first and most famous work, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, has been praised for constructing black female characters who are “unquestionably strong, capable, independent, assertive” (Denniston 16) and who embody a “determination to resist” (Christol 150) homogenized cultural formations.

In a basic sense, such assessments of *Brown Girl* are valid. The novel frequently focuses on a kind of gendered struggle that demands a certain amount of wilfulness and drive. The protagonist’s mother, Silla Boyce, is undeniably strong and capable, yet the suggestion that the novel depicts a “determination to resist” stereotypical ideas of racial and gender identity is tough to swallow. Most of the novel’s characters (with Silla as their leading example) relentlessly pursue property and money in a way that mimics rather than analyzes Western capitalist and masculinist ideas of value. The novel itself, I think, critiques such acquisitiveness, yet most criticism of the novel fails to contend with the conflicted relationship between “resistance” and “struggle” that Marshall presents. Mary Helen

Washington's idea that Silla acts as "the avatar of the community's deepest values and needs" (315), for example, fails to recognize the degree to which Silla is in fact an agent of the community's desire for cultural self-destruction. Further, what is important is the degree to which her desires and ideals work to undercut notions of identity that depart from white masculinist norms.

Here, I would like to consider how Marshall, a writer usually considered exclusively in terms of feminist thought, handles the concept of masculinity. I will also illustrate some significant, and frequently disturbing, connections between certain types of feminist discourse and some of the more destructive aspects of hegemonic masculinity.² Bluntly, I would like to examine feminist treatments of *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* in light of emerging discourses on masculinities and to suggest that many versions of the "unquestionably strong, capable, independent, assertive" (Denniston 16) woman might in fact be subtle re-articulations of conventional masculine norms. The struggle Marshall depicts in *Brown Girl* might not be a struggle to resist, but rather a struggle to dissolve racial and sexual difference into something very like the universalized male experience feminist discourse generally seeks to deconstruct. The result is a dubious kind of feminist victory whereby Marshall's women are considered strong, powerful and good only insofar as they conform to the dictates of a visibly performed hegemonic masculinity.

In most contemporary studies of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is conceived in terms of an emphasis on external factors and a suppression of interior signals. In *Manhood in the Making*, David Gilmore imagines a "quasi-global" notion of hegemonic masculinity in terms of an identity focused on "visible, concrete accomplishments" (36), an identity formation aimed at attaining "approbation and admiration in the judgmental eyes of others" (37).³ As such, the discourse of "the Real Man" marginalizes feelings and thoughts, and feminizes what Roger Horrocks calls "inner space" (40). It renders invisible signals unmasculine and reinforces Jeff Hearn's claim that "men are constructed through public visibility" (3). This being the case, a universalized and homogenized gender identity develops, one that "debilitates individualism" as each man "aims to stay uncontaminated by the alleged inferiority of

(his own intrinsic) alterity” (Schoene-Harwood xii). Ultimately, this amounts to what Peter Middleton calls a “cultivated occlusion of self-reflection,” a systematic effort to suppress sensitivity and ambiguity and to perform a masculinity defined exclusively in terms of the demands of “the judgmental eyes of others” (190).

In light of the above constructions, investigations into hegemonic masculinity might seem to be at odds with Marshall’s self-conscious position as a writer of emancipatory minority discourse. If her novels are imagined in terms of an effort to come “out from under the seduction of another’s values” (“Interview” 4) and express a “particular spirited self” (“Meditations” 285), then a simultaneously reductive and universalized masculinity would seem to function strictly as a straightforward and unambiguous agent of oppression, one that does not require detailed investigation so much as sustained contestation. Yet Marshall’s handling of gender turns out to be neither straightforward nor unambiguous. I would like to argue that particularity and the spirited self are under siege in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, not from an uncompromising male presence, but rather from a female character, Silla Boyce, who is often figured as “an avatar” for the survival of minority cultural practice. I also want to suggest that the novel’s primary male figure, Deighton Boyce, is attacked by his own community for failing to suppress the inferiority of his own intrinsic alterity, for failing to be a “real-real Bajan man” (*Brown Girl* 173). More specifically, I want to argue that Deighton’s emasculation is figured through a systematic deconstruction of his role as father. Together, I think Silla and Deighton confirm the validity of Lieve Spaas’s description of “the profound difference between the biological reality of paternity and the cultural construct of father, the procreating *genitor* and the authority-wielding *pater*” (1). In *Brown Girl*, father may be *genitor*, but mother is *pater*, and the complexity of Marshall’s gender disruption has thus far been overlooked. The effort to establish and express a particularly spirited self is very much at issue in *Brown Girl*, but not in a way that observes conventional notions of male and female identities and roles.

Critical treatments of Deighton Boyce tend to overlook the complexity of Marshall’s depiction of gender. They have either tacitly or explic-

itly endorsed Debra Schneider's comment that "Silla's situation is made more difficult by her husband's ideas about all things due to him as a man" (70), a suggestion that positions the female as a marginal figure contending with an imposing male authority. Such arguments are entirely correct when they conclude that Deighton's ambitions cannot be reconciled with the austerity of his life in New York. However, these arguments trade on reductive ideas of gender roles and lack a clear understanding of the novel's complex gender dynamic. Deighton tells his daughter, "I got big plans or nothing a-tall. That's the way a man does do things," and he is viewed as "a dark god . . . who [has] fallen from his heaven and [lies] stunned on earth" (*Brown Girl* 83, 52). His "big plans" are directly associated with his ideas of manhood and make him disinclined to "scuffle" the way Silla does, and the collapse of his mythic status as a dark god haunts him throughout the novel. While others buckle down to thankless tasks, Deighton idly dreams of seeing his "name in lights," of seeing his identity manifested in public space as somebody who "does get people respect" (*Brown Girl* 85, 84). In this sense, Deighton might well be viewed as a vainglorious male figure with an overdeveloped sense of entitlement.

But Deighton's characterization is much more complex than the above paragraph suggests, and the link between Deighton's behaviour and hegemonic masculinity is much more conflicted than Schneider acknowledges. Deighton is anything but a straightforward agent of patriarchal power, and Silla's problem seems to have almost nothing to do with her husband's excessive maleness. He is quite specifically delineated as the victim of experiences that "utterly unmanned him before he was yet a man," and, as such, his behaviour seems motivated not by a sense of privilege, but by a sense of loss (*Brown Girl* 182).⁴ He is not puffed-up with an exaggerated sense of what his manhood deserves so much as he is profoundly anxious about the manhood he feels he is missing. His preoccupations, both with his land in Barbados and with his youth (despite advancing age and mounting pressures he looks "very young and irresponsible"), reflect a longing for a stage before he had become "unmanned," a stage when a legitimate adult masculinity still seemed possible (*Brown Girl* 22). In *Men's Silences*, Jonathan Rutherford

describes this phenomenon in terms of “a specifically masculine form of nostalgia” that is linked to a “transitional loss of cultural authority” (125). As masculine identity becomes less and less tenable in the world of everyday experience, “nostalgia replaces the imperfect present with a perfect past” (Rutherford 127). Because Deighton was the last child, and, more significantly, “the only boy” in his family, his youth was conditioned by a mother who believed “the sun rise and set ’pon” (32) his every desire, and this period of psychological and emotional security (a space where even the sun does his bidding) provides him with what Thomas Pavel calls a “sacred space” (77) in the narrative of his life. His youth in Barbados acts as a grand narrative in which he operates as a heroic figure, while in New York he becomes a kind of “profane reality” (Pavel 77), factually real, but, as an agent of his loss of cultural authority, completely outside any workable notion of his masculine identity.

The land in Barbados, then, is not just the stuff of idle and vain-glorious dreaming; it is the centre of his emotional life, the source of his self-identification and the site where his masculine identity might be redeemed. The land represents the still-possible dream that people might someday say, “Deighton Boyce is one man that makes money and lives good,” and perhaps more poignantly, it represents his refusal to accept his emasculated position in a city where he “doesn’t exist fuh true” (*Brown Girl* 85, 66). In this context, Silla’s decision to secretly sell Deighton’s property amounts to the collapse of his remaining chance at a stable masculine identity, a collapse that disqualifies him from any claims at being the family’s patriarch, which further feminizes an already unstable masculine performance and leads directly to his death.

The sale of the land, of course, is only the final phase of a long process of emasculation. From the very beginning of the novel, Deighton’s relationship with dominant masculine norms is strained and, as a result, his identity as a man is constantly called into question. In *Manhood in the Making*, Gilmore figures hegemonic masculinity in terms of an imperative triad composed of man the impregnator, man the protector, and man the provider (223). Deighton, the father of two girls and a deceased son, is clearly successful as an impregnator, yet his failures as both protector and provider ultimately compromise his claims at a legitimate

masculine identity. While walking down a New York street, Deighton is pointedly positioned “at a distance” from the robust masculinities of the men wrestling and swearing outside the bar. “Jarred by . . . violence,” Deighton lacks the aggression necessary for the role of protector and as a result he is “envious and respectful” of the others because “there [is] no question that they [are] truly men” (*Brown Girl* 37). A sensitive man who likes the feel of silk against his skin, Deighton is a man for whom the visible “proofs of manhood [are] alien” and he feels himself subordinated to men who are able to affirm masculine legitimacy “by flashing a knife or smashing out with their fists or tumbling one of the whores in the bar onto a bed” (*Brown Girl* 37–38). Unable to uphold any kind of violent masculine performance and no longer able to sexually satisfy his wife (his hands no longer “arouse . . . the full and awesome passion they once had”), Deighton falls outside conventional masculine norms and feels anxiety as a result (*Brown Girl* 23).

Much more significantly, however, Deighton’s failures as man-the-provider lead to conflicts with Silla, conflicts that reverse the roles of father and mother, leaving Deighton in a feminized position. However much Deighton is compromised by his sensitivity and his sexual inadequacies, his failure to “get ahead” financially amounts to the crux of the novel and the source of its many conflicts. Clearly, the conflict between Deighton and Silla is one of Marshall’s most emphatic examples of “the acquisitive nature of [American] society [and] its devastating impact on human relationships” (“Shaping” 108), yet it is also one directly figured around reductive notions of masculine legitimacy. In the eyes of his wife and the wider Barbadian community, Deighton is not a real man because he does not make enough money. His assessment of Barbados as “poor poor but sweet enough” (*Brown Girl* 11) reveals an emphasis on the internal that hegemonic masculinity cannot accommodate, and a less-than-masculine acceptance of a world outside visible accomplishments.

In his study of the sociology of fatherhood, Leonard Benson claims that “the breadwinner task is unquestionably the father’s key responsibility [and] lies at the core of our ideology of fatherhood” (271), yet Deighton conceives of his relationships with his children in emotional, not finan-

cial, terms.⁵ Despite Ina’s fears that he has forgotten her in his heart, Deighton specifically locates her most prized memory when he recalls how they “used to walk ’bout downtown looking in the people window when [she] was small,” and, far from being a distant money-maker, he has an intimate knowledge of her tastes that allows him to select a dress that makes her “smile luminously” (*Brown Girl* 126, 127). His similarly subtle and reflective relationship with Selina leads him to buy gift-certificates for books because he remembers a single moment in the past when she said she wanted “[b]ooks that would be [hers], that [she] wun have to take back to these people library” (127). These purchases are hardly stern or practical and they provoke harsh judgments from the wider community, yet he risks this censure and buys the gifts anyway because he knows it will make the girls *feel* good.⁶ The precision of his memory and the thoughtfulness of his choices represent an emphasis on inner space rather than concrete visible accomplishments, and this compromises his paternal performance making him more mother than father. His actions are those not of an aloof, ego-driven *pater*, but of a dotting, other-driven maternal figure, one who really *knows* the children, even if he does not provide the financial resources to give them everything they want.

This being the case, there is something really peculiar about Schneider’s suggestion that Silla’s main problem is Deighton’s gendered sense of entitlement as a man. It is true that Deighton frustrates Silla’s efforts to purchase property in New York, but his disinclination for Silla’s project is hardly a matter of his adherence to conventionally masculine modes of behaviour. The problem seems just the opposite, that he is not manly *enough*. Silla’s problem is that Deighton is not hard-headed and hard-hearted enough to fulfill her dreams (and they are solely hers) of keeping up with the Joneses. Instead, he wants to buy something *pretty* for the kids, his wife and himself. As such, he is too “girly” for his wife’s tastes. Frustrated that he is passive where he “ought” to be aggressive and poor when he ought to be rich, she asks “what kind of a man he is, nuh?” because she cannot situate him in terms of the masculine norms established by the rest of the community (*Brown Girl* 24).

Silla’s question presupposes its own answer, of course. Deighton is not a very good man according to most conventional standards, particularly

in the context of an immigrant experience based on the pursuit of material prosperity. In Nancy Foner's *New Immigrants in New York*, "the lure of the United States" is imagined in almost exclusively material terms, in terms of "the availability of jobs; the higher wages; and the promise of amenities, including, most importantly, higher levels of living and more consumer goods" (198). When Deighton refuses to pursue these goals and instead aligns himself with a return to Barbados (a space that is paradoxically "poor" and "sweet"), he disrupts the wider community's efforts to "get ahead" in New York City. While the Barbadian Association is preoccupied with the material practicalities of New York, that is, with demonstrating that it has "a *business* mind," Deighton retreats into a variety of invisible, imaginary frameworks outside the framework of both American capitalism and visible accomplishments (*Brown Girl* 221). To Deighton, New York is a place in which he "doesn't exist fuh true" (66), and instead of following his wife's program of social advancement he constructs his "real" life in the metaphorical terms of memory and emotion, in terms of inner rather than "outer" space.

In so doing, he makes a decisive move away from the world of visible concrete accomplishments, the most obvious of which would be ownership of his house. He tells Selina, "as far as the record goes I ain even in this country since I did enter illegally . . . I don't even exist as far as these people here go" (66), and this makes New York the site of his ontological dissolution rather than the focus of his existence. Refusing the ontological insecurity of living in a place where he is not really real, he disassociates himself from New York, its ideology, and most importantly, from the compromised existence the city imposes on people who do not exist "for true."

Paradoxically, then, he ceases to be a "real Bajan man" by refusing to become a committed New Yorker. While "every West Indian out here taking a lesson from the Jew landlord," Deighton retains a desire to go "home and breathe good Bimshire air" (*Brown Girl* 173, 85). As a Barbadian man in New York, his alterity is registered by Barbados itself, and his masculine identity is compromised by his desire to operate outside the norms of American capitalism. His nostalgic and emotional desire to go home confirms his inability to achieve the "hardiness and

self-discipline required by the male role” (Gilmore 220–21). It signifies his inability to grasp the seemingly hardwired relationship between what Andrea Greenbaum calls “brass balls” masculinity and “the discourse of capitalism” (33). In the end, Deighton embodies “‘feminine’ values—compassion, nurturance, empathy—[that] are threatening to the men’s business ethos” (Greenbaum 36) and his demise can be directly traced to this feminized alterity.⁷ His “unnatural acceptance” of his disappointments and his belief that such defeats are “simply his due” cannot be reconciled with aggressive acquisitiveness, and lead first to his abandonment of any kind of masculine identity, later to his death (*Brown Girl* 115). Not surprisingly, the dissolution of his identity in the Father Peace movement involves the renunciation of material possessions (and hence the role of provider) and is figured through a movement from a paternal to a filial role. He insists that his children “mustn’t call [him] ‘Daddy’” because his new cosmology maintains that “we’s all [God’s] children and brothers and sisters to one another” (*Brown Girl* 171, 172). Joining Father Peace, then, is abandoning paternal function, a move that amounts to the complete collapse of Gilmore’s masculine triad. Not protector, not provider, not father, Deighton ultimately exclaims, “I am nothing” shortly before he commits suicide (169).⁸

And, as Deighton gradually renounces all claims at hegemonic masculine authority, Silla greedily assumes the position of patriarch. Early in the novel, she appears as the quintessential *pater familias*, “cool, alert [and] holding the newspaper,” and, as the novel progresses her masculine performance only intensifies (52). Aggressive where her husband is sensitive, and acquisitive where he is apathetic, she acts as emotionless protector and provider. Both her preoccupation with her daughters’ chastity (she will throw them out onto the street before she raises any “wild dog puppies”) and her clear preference for her deceased “boy child” reflect a paternalistic interest in preserving a “pure” reproductive line and retaining the respect of her peers (42, 30). More importantly, perhaps, she is characterized in terms of a relentless war on all interior processes, a consistent contempt for anything that cannot be figured in terms of visible concrete accomplishments: when Ina becomes religious, Silla tries to undermine her spirituality, and when Selina begins

to dance, her mother is more likely to “take apart this building bare-handed” than to encourage her talents (*Brown Girl* 277). Silla applauds Clive’s mother for destroying his paintings, and thinks of him as a kind of effeminate contagion, something less than a man. Combining a critique of emotion with an endorsement of profitable enterprise, she tells Selina that Clive “ain nobody to be associating with. A man that’s hiding from work with tears in his eyes” (259).⁹ To Silla, emotion is not just pointless, it is an insidious impediment to material advancement. When Selina suggests that Gatha Steed’s efforts to buy her daughter a nice wedding gown cannot erase the emotional distance between bride and groom, Silla’s contempt is evident. “Love!” she says, “give me a dollar in my hand any day” (104).

Silla’s contempt for inner space, then, is predicated upon an exaggerated interest in visible concrete accomplishments. The easily observed presence of the dollar in the hand makes the inherent interiority of love both unintelligible and useless. Under such conditions, the most visible demonstration of a dollar in the hand is property ownership, and Silla’s desire to own a house can be read in terms of a quintessentially masculine desire for “approbation in the judgemental eyes of others.” Not surprisingly, attaining her goal demands that she “steel her heart” against any kind of emotion, which she considers a sign of weakness (*Brown Girl* 131). If this is the case, readings of the novel that imagine Silla’s project in terms of her love for her children need to be re-examined in light of love’s unintelligibility in Silla’s masculine performance. If emotion is what needs to be eliminated, how can love be the motivating force?

To me, it seems quite clear that Silla’s aspirations are not a matter of any nurturing desire to better the conditions of her children. She destroys her relationships with her entire family to pursue a dream that is solely hers, and, because she has no time for invisible, interior processes, she is willing to see her “soul fall howling into hell” as long as she can save face in the wider community (*Brown Girl* 75). Despite many critics’ hopeful suggestions to the contrary, Silla is neither a loving mother nor a trail-blazing feminist: she is an old-school patriarch intent on making money and winning respect at all costs. She feels that “children ain nothing but a keepback” in her quest for financial prosperity,

but critics justify her pathology in terms of a “love” for her children that manifests itself only in soul-destroying outbursts (30). She freely admits that she wants to “make out like the rest” (*Brown Girl* 174) and hopes to follow her friends into Crown Heights, yet Washington somehow concludes Silla is “forging a path through unfamiliar territory, cutting brush for those behind her” (312). Quite the opposite, she is *following* the pattern laid out by her friends, friends who “ain white yet,” but who take their models of behaviour from the very male world of “big-shot white executives” (*Brown Girl* 221).

It is also important to remember that the central struggle in the novel is not to move a struggling family out of squalor and into decency, but rather to purchase the house they are already living in. As such, Silla craves a change in social status, not a material shift.¹⁰ The much talked about children end up in the same house whether Silla gets her way or not, and any argument suggesting Silla’s primary motivation is to help her children must account for the fact that the distinction she seeks involves *her* position in the hierarchy of the community, not her children’s position in geographical space.

So far, there is little critical recognition that this is the case. Even if it *is* true that Silla’s desire to buy the brownstone is disrupted by Deighton, the validity of Silla’s desire still needs attention, attention that is absent in almost every treatment of the novel. Critical representations of Silla as “a perfect representative of the community of black women [who] embodies positive values” (Christol 149), as someone involved in a “fight for basic survival” (de Abruna 250), and as someone who “is not obsessed with status in the least” (Schneider 70) seem to me to be almost entirely unsupported by the text. More damagingly, they demonstrate how Marshall’s critics are unable to conceive of a notion of “success” outside Silla’s reductive materialism, reflecting the extent to which the masculinist ethos of capitalist logic has transcended the need for justification to such a degree that even self-consciously feminist treatments consider “a dollar in the hand” as an *a priori* good and interior signals as unintelligible and pointless.¹¹

In the terms I am using here, Silla is not so much an emblem of cultural resistance as an embodiment of a cut-throat masculinist ethos main-

taining that, in order “to make your way in this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own” (*Brown Girl* 224). As such, she demonstrates both that “success in [the American] capitalist framework comes at a steep price—the obliteration of compassion, loyalty and trustworthiness,” and, perhaps more emphatically, that “women stand in direct opposition to the fulfillment of the American Dream—the ability to make something out of nothing” (Greenbaum 37, 39). Disassociating herself from all feminine attributes, Silla re-makes herself as a masculine figure in order to pursue her very American dream, and, acting as patriarch, she demonstrates the validity of both Gilmore’s claim that “big-balled men . . . tower over and dominate their less well-endowed and more phlegmatic fellows” (41) and Greenbaum’s parallel suggestion that “to *not* be masculine (sans “balls”) *is* to be feminine” (36). Deighton’s suffering as a feminized man is an emphatic demonstration of the validity of these observations. Just as Silla predicts, he ends up “dead-dead at [her] feet,” while Silla’s brass-balled masculinity assumes control (*Brown Girl* 131).¹² And, while Deighton is imagined as a deposed god “stunned” at his compromised position on earth, Silla begins to appear as a kind of malevolent omniscient being (“you’s God, you must know”), an association that links her directly to the brutal masculinity of Percy Challenor “presiding like a threatening god at the head of his table on Sundays” (*Brown Girl* 24, 169).¹³ Admiring Challenor’s ability to eliminate all interior signals and become “nothing but a work horse,” Silla accepts (rather than critiques) the idea that “those on top got a right to scuffle to stay there” (*Brown Girl* 54, 225) because she lives entirely in terms of an aggressive and competitive world in which the strong control the weak. Gilmore maintains that “manliness means results” and Silla sees no need to muddy this exteriority with ethical or moral questions (41). While Clive’s compromised masculinity tries not “to hurt people when they’re so damn fragile inside,” Silla (perplexed at the mysteries of her daughter’s emotional life) hovers over an unprofitable invalid tenant shouting, “why you wun dead, nuh?” wondering what the old woman has to live for if she isn’t worth a dime (*Brown Girl* 254, 202).¹⁴

The dominance of this cultural logic and the unintelligibility of all other modes of masculine performance are also essential to the forma-

tion of the perhaps misleadingly named Barbadian Association. In her study of West Indian immigrants in New York, Linda Basch maintains that “voluntary societies” play an important role in immigrant life by “providing an arena in which the group can reaffirm its traditional heritage and ethnicity in an alien context,” yet it is often difficult to figure out how, exactly, the association depicted in the novel affirms traditional heritage (162). The speeches delivered at the association’s first meeting originally seem to suggest that the association is working to preserve Barbadian identity, yet this pretence is gradually revealed as not only false, but counter to the association’s true project which is to “adopt the same single-minded selfish values of their detractors” (Denniston 23). Cecil Osbourne’s opening speech claims the Barbadian Association acts as “a sign that people have banded together in a spirit of self-help,” asserting the presence of “a little fish in a big white sea,” a construction that implies that cooperation and minority identity are central to the group’s purpose (*Brown Girl* 221). Yet, conflict erupts immediately when Claremont Sealy insists that, “our doors got to be open to every colored person that qualify” (*Brown Girl* 222). Sealy’s suggestion that the community become *more* cooperative and more inclusive leads directly to the charge that he is “nothing but a *commonist*” because the community’s notion of “banding together” is subsumed by its larger interest in the privatized, competitive, white, masculinist logic of capitalist discourse (223). When Osbourne says “we ain’ white yet . . . but we got our eye on the big time”(221) the group feels “as if they [are] no longer individuals . . . but a puissant force, sure of its goal and driving hard toward it” (222); when Sealy proposes a kind of Garveyist Pan-Africanism, everybody gets upset because they are unwilling or unable to think outside a template that equates private property with personal legitimacy. Rather than creating a nurturing, inclusive, cooperative environment, the association ultimately upholds the view that nurturing is effeminate and unnecessary. Silla feels no racial connection with poor black roomers because “I had to get mine too hard,” and, because everybody else feels (more or less) the same way, the spirit of banding together gives way to the logic of the free market; “people got to make their own way” (*Brown Girl* 224).¹⁵

Ultimately, then, Marshall's Barbadian community has no time for "soft" signifiers and devotes itself to performing the aggressive masculinity encoded by the capitalist ethos. After the community discovers that Deighton has spent the family's money on pretty presents rather than investing in property, they figure his departure from their (adopted) cultural norms in terms of a kind of infection they do not wish to catch. When Deighton is deliberately and uniformly rejected by the dancers at the wedding, the community uses its cultural heritage as an expression of hostility against a man who has failed to perform the masculine function, and they refigure the dance in terms of the masculine world of concrete accomplishments (rather than in terms of relaxation, enjoyment, and so on). When the dancers at the party use their backs to "form a wall against him," they use a cultural expression of life, beauty, joy, and sex to censure Deighton for his interest in the very factors that gave (and should give) rise to the dance in the first place (*Brown Girl* 150). Lloyd W. Brown perceptively views the novel in terms of "the life force," which is embodied by Deighton, and "the machine force," embodied by Silla. Under such a framework, Brown believes that

The machine-like force of the immigrants' inflexible purpose has really mechanized the calypso. The calypso is, intrinsically, a rhythm symbol of the life-force. But the ritual expulsion at the wedding party (in effect an exclusion from the sexual rites of the life-force) transforms the calypso into an instrument of the immigrants' determination to secure . . . material rewards. (161)

In the terms I am using, the life force might well be aligned with nurturing, feminized values and the machine force with competitive "male" ones. In either construction, the dancers reject Deighton because he is too interested in things like dancing and not interested enough in making money. This is a judgment made *by* a marginalized community of Barbadians, but, more importantly, it is a judgment *for* the hegemonic masculinity of capitalist economics. Because Barbados is "poor poor," the island ultimately registers not as a revered homeland but as a feminized space for the weak and the lazy, a space that is no longer ap-

propriate for ambitious brass-balled New Yorkers with their eyes on the big time (*Brown Girl* 11). When Deighton tries to include himself in the dance, the worst thing they can think to do to him is to call him a small time, small islander.¹⁶ As he approaches, the voices of the community “rush full tilt at him, scouring him and finally driving him from their presence with their song, ‘Small Island, go back where you really come from’” (150). Not long afterwards, they get their wish and Deighton leaves New York, not for the small-island of his youth but to be dissolved into the archetypal maternity of the sea. An absolute failure as a man, he finally abandons the quest to see his name and lights and renders himself invisible and anonymous, unmarked even by a tombstone.

Near the end of the novel, Selina reflects upon her past judgments and on the wisdom she has gained, saying, “my trouble maybe was that I wanted everything to be simple—the good clearly separated from the bad—the way a child sees things” (*Brown Girl* 303). As a *bildungsroman*, the novel tracks her journey from childlike certainty to adult ambiguity and toward the end of the book she begins to perceive a world that is complex and contradictory rather than reductive and smooth. In this article, I have tried to demonstrate how many critical reactions to the novel ignore the lesson Selina clearly learns, how critical readings demonstrate a desire for things to be simple and smooth. I have tried to show that Marshall’s critics want the good and the bad to be separated according to conventions that figure gender in reductive and uncomplicated ways, and I have attempted to show how unworkable those ideas are, how complicated Marshall’s construction of gender really is. In *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, patriarchal authority is not ultimately a matter of sexual identity or reproductive function, but of hegemonic masculine performance. Men who fail to measure up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity are “unmanned,” while women who visibly perform a ruthless, “big-balled” masculinity act as patriarchs. Inside a capitalist discourse that aligns manhood with money and femininity with emotion, biological identities based on sexual difference are ultimately less significant than visible demonstrations of virility and aggression. In the end, efforts to situate Silla Boyce inside feminist discourse are efforts to duplicate rather than critique hegemonic masculine norms, and any de-

fence of Silla's behaviour amounts to an unwitting endorsement of a discourse that suppresses all forms of interiority in favour of a world where "results" are the only things that matter.

Notes

- 1 While Marshall has never achieved the kind of critical and popular success that Toni Morrison or Alice Walker have, she has been a major presence in the world of American women's writing for several decades, and was among the first black American women to achieve any kind of recognition from the literary world. And, while Marshall's complicated and convincing treatments of political, social and interpersonal relationships have not, perhaps, been seen as "socially relevant" in the manner of Morrison and Walker, she has received several literary awards and honours, including the American Book Award, the Langston Hughes Medallion Award and the John Dos Passos Award. In 1990, she was honoured with the PEN/Faulkner Award.
- 2 Critical writings on Marshall consist of at least two full-length studies, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender* by Dorothy Hamer Denniston, and *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* by Joyce Pettis. There is also a fairly substantial collection of essays and reviews in journals like *ARIEL*, *World Literature Written in English* and *SAGE*, and in larger studies like *The African American Novel Since 1960*, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, or *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*. As the above might suggest, the critical preoccupation has been with matters having to do with race, gender and geography. There has been almost no effort to consider the works of fiction as distinct story worlds, just a repeated effort to delineate useful, real world allegories from the texts. And, while such a strategy might be appropriate when approaching a more programmatic writer like Walker, Marshall's work is not self-consciously *instructive* in the same way. As a result, critical efforts to find straightforward instructions are often strained and unconvincing.
- 3 Given the global legacy of European imperialism, this "global" vision is implicitly linked with a project that figured "whiteness" as a universalized form.
- 4 Specifically, Deighton is "unmanned" in his effort "to be like" the dominant white males he encountered in colonial Barbados (*Brown Girl* 182). This being the case, his emasculation simultaneously amounts to a kind of re-racination, an abandonment of the pointless project of becoming white, and his lack of interest in the Barbadian Association, with its rallying cry "we ain white yet, but we got our eye on the big time," might well be read as a rejection of a project he already knows to hopeless (*Brown Girl* 221).
- 5 This is not to suggest that Deighton is indifferent to his children's wellbeing, just that he refuses (or fails) to perform the paternal role in a conventional way.

His insistence that “a man got a right to take his ease in this life and not always be scuffling” marks a clear departure from the quintessentially masculine approach of Percy Challenor, who is represented as “a pagan deity of wrath [with] his children cowering before the fire flaring from his nostrils” (*Brown Girl* 85, 54). Without Challenor’s aggressive nature or his money, Deighton’s version of parenting tends toward a feminized, nurturing role rather than a role defined in terms of protecting and providing.

- 6 Byerman recognizes Deighton’s distaste for the visible, practical world, observing that Deighton’s various career decisions reveal an interest in the “abstract rather than concrete” (138).
- 7 As bizarre as the comparison seems to be, Greenbaum’s study of David Mamet and masculinity contains assessments that are more applicable to *Brown Girl’s* business ethos than many strained efforts to situate it in terms of feminist or minority discourse.
- 8 It is also significant that Silla receives the news of Deighton’s death at sea just as the radio announces the war’s successful resolution (*Brown Girl* 185), juxtaposing the demise of a failed masculinity with the triumph of the quintessentially masculine figure of the soldier hero.
- 9 She dismisses Ina’s boyfriend’s masculine identity on similar grounds, saying, “he does give me a bad feel. He’s so softy-soft” (191).
- 10 Obviously, ownership suggests greater security, and, in some situations, mortgage rates can be lower than monthly rents, but none of this ever seems to make any impact in the novel. Selina’s college tuition is free, and there are no suggestions that life becomes any easier after Silla buys the house. Indeed, insofar as there are any indications of increased prosperity since the purchase of the brownstone, they suggest that all the money has been re-routed toward Silla’s new, and still very personal, goal of a *bigger* house in a *better* neighbourhood.
- 11 Byerman does recognize that Silla’s joyless enterprise is damaging and debilitates individuality, noting that, for Silla, “conformity . . . is the measure of success” (140).
- 12 Byerman claims Silla’s purpose is “not the destruction of Deighton’s manhood, but the transformation of his values,” but his claim only makes sense in the context of an intelligible masculinity (*Brown Girl* 144). In my view, Deighton’s manhood is always compromised and it is his distance from masculine norms that enrages his wife. Silla, as an agent of hegemonic masculinity, seeks to destroy Deighton as a feminized, not a masculine, figure.
- 13 The link between Silla’s behaviour and Percy Challenor’s manhood is made even more explicit when Selina speaks to Challenor’s daughter, Beryl. Cowed by the authority of the patriarchal presence in each girl’s life, Selina rejects conventional gender parallelisms when she says, “I can’t imagine your father ever being small, or my mother either,” thus figuring her mother (rather than her father) as Challenor’s closest peer (*Brown Girl* 59).

- 14 I do not mean to overlook the racial dimension of Silla's hatred here (her rage that the old woman's daughter "never once count me to speak because my skin black"), just to highlight the old woman's helplessness and, by extension, Silla's acceptance of a worldview where the weak are systematically destroyed by the strong (*Brown Girl* 203).
- 15 It is also worth remembering that ideological debates about socialist values are deeply invested in discourses of masculinity. Socialist values register as soft in the discourse of capitalism because they admit that the individual agent is vulnerable and requires cooperation and protection, while robust and "free" competition reveals the true measure of a man. Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2004 comments about the divide between "brave" and "strong" Republican values and those of the "economic girly man" make this quite explicit.
- 16 In this sense, the Barbadian community duplicates the earlier behaviour of the white clerks who ridicule Deighton's effort to identify with the dominant cultural position. In many ways, the community has turned the calypso into the exact reverse of the carnival tradition Bakhtin describes. Rather than using the festive occasion to "express their distrust of official truth" (269) and suspend existing hierarchies—what Victor Turner calls a "lampooning liberty" (104)—they use it to affirm white middle-class masculine notions of value, and to further isolate a marginal figure.

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