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NO OUTLET FOR THE BLUES:
SILLA BOYCE'S PLIGHT IN *BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES*

by Trudier Harris

Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* presents a clash of cultures not only for the young protagonist Selina Boyce, who is torn between her father's love for Barbados and her mother's desire to succeed to the American Dream, but also for Silla Boyce, who has similar conflicts. This strong, bitter, frustrated, disappointed, loving, vindictive woman, who keeps striving in the face of all disappointments, is perhaps one of the most complex black women characters in contemporary American literature. Here is a woman who wants things for her family (a house, college education) but who is married to a man who wants different kinds of things (a big car, flashy silk shirts, a reputation as a dapper man). Here is a mother who loves her two daughters, especially Selina, the one who causes her most trouble, but who is tongue-tied when it comes to expressing that love. Here is a woman who needs love and the comfort of supporting, tender arms, but who cannot forgive her husband for the death of their only male child. Here is a woman who wishes to blend into the mainstream of American society as quickly as possible, who is destructively desperate to achieve middle class status, but who spends her Saturdays making the black pudding, souse, and coconut bread which tie her to her Bajan background.

The powerful emotions at war within Silla—love and hate, acceptance and rejection, desire and denial of desire, aspiration and defeat—keep her forever in a state of simmering rage. Her cheating husband is never quite the mate she imagined he would be, and her daughters, Ina and Selina, are never quite the perfect children she had hoped for, though Ina is certainly more boring and acquiescent than Selina could ever be. These emotions set Silla adrift between the Bajan culture which claims her and the American culture which continues to reject her. Whites are almost totally unaware of Silla, and she does not wish to be identified with poor Bajans who “come here hungry from down some gully or up some hill behind God back” (p. 24). Silla sees Black American culture, which she could perhaps blend into eventually, as a step below herself and her family. In a way, Silla's situation as an immigrant, lost between the larger white American culture and the smaller black American one in a little island that she and Bajans like her have created in Brooklyn, is comparable to that of the tragic mulattoes of earlier literature. Whites will never fully accept her, and Blacks always see her as different, strange. Silla believes that she is so much

better than the Blacks around her that their acceptance, even if it were won, would not bring her peace of mind.

Although Silla sees herself as apart from black culture, her condition, her day-to-day frustrated existence, can be explored in a form that is peculiar to black culture. Silla is living an intense form of the blues, that worrying, "downhearted," "anxiety-ridden,"* painful phenomenon which epitomize the condition of American Blacks. Alienated, lost, financially insecure, cheated in love, these Blacks wail their misery into a responding guitar or piano either actively or vicariously and find their way out of the deep, dark, funky holes of despair. Since the blues is peculiarly Afro-American, it is not expected that Silla would be aware of the condition or its artistic expressions. It is therefore ironic that something which she would probably reject describes her own situation so well. The blues as a musical form allows precisely what Silla does not have—an outlet for her frustration. From Langston Hughes's weary bluesman, who could beat his troubles into the keys of a piano and sleep "like a rock or a man that's dead," to Ralph Ellison's invisible man, who could keep re-playing the misery of his painful initiation into manhood until he made sense of it, the blues have been a way for black Americans to articulate and/or exorcise their suffering. Silla is just as frustrated as Ellison's invisible man by the condition of being "black and blue" in America, and her work as a maid to whites has probably given her many weary nights like those of the piano player, but she can only turn the pain inward—to self-destruction and increasing loss of her humanity—instead of releasing it outward.

Silla's very life is a state of the blues, and her lack of a sustained means of expressing it, either artistically or otherwise, intensifies the complexity of her personality and makes her at once nice and disgusting, inviting and rejecting, attractive and repulsive, to us. Silla, like Toni Morrison's *Sula*, becomes destructive not only because she cannot articulate the full source of her frustration, but because she has no instrument for expression and because she refuses to confront many of the problems which bring on her blues.

Take, for instance, Silla's relationship to her husband Deighton. In the back of her mind, she blames Deighton for taking their young son out for a ride in his status-seeking automobile, a ride which shook "up his insides" and further aggravated the weak heart that killed him. She withdraws her affection from her husband, and he in turn withholds

*These two phrases are taken from Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 4.

the affection that she needs so desperately. For years, they are only the married parents of children; they are not lovers. They do not share the same bed. Silla knows her husband goes through the ritual of dressing fancy every Saturday night to visit his lover, but she refuses to confront him with that knowledge. She thus lives in a state of perpetual loneliness, losing love underneath her own roof. She cannot bring love back without removing the cause of her grief, without forgiving her husband, and that she is incapable of doing. So she lives in frustration, without emotional or physical release.

Silla tells herself that she can live without Deighton, but the life is an unfulfilling one. At least Deighton drowns his grief with the woman referred to as his concubine. Silla's only outlet seems to be her Saturday rituals cooking with the other Bajans. It is ironic that this ritual, intended to soothe her mind from a week's hard work and earn a few pennies toward the house she desperately wants to buy to escape her past, is the one thing that ties her so closely to that background and underscores her estrangement from Deighton. As they prepare their island delicacies and discuss the latest news of home, the women offer only temporary respite from the troubles Silla must face. Certainly the blues offers that as well, but it is a total release; Silla's Saturdays with the women frequently illustrate just how intense is her frustration. They discuss their problems, but talk leads to no catharsis, only more sorrow. The women's talk usually concerns Deighton's inadequacies as husband/father/provider, their sons being drafted into World War II, their back-breaking work as maids, their desperation to buy houses, or the latest string of upwardly mobile Bajans who have somehow widened the gap between these women and the American Dream.

There is never the ultimate release of the bluesman who "slept like a rock or a man that's dead." Silla, more so than the rest of the women, knows no peace with herself. Even when she is alone, she is the picture of frustration. When she learns that Deighton's sister in Barbados has left him almost two acres of land, which she will later try unsuccessfully to get him to sell to get money for a down payment on a brownstone in Brooklyn, her contemplation of her comparative bad luck takes precedence over any mildly good feeling she may have for Deighton's good fortune. She sits talking to herself:

'But look how trouble does come,' she whispered, straining forward as though addressing some specter-shape. 'Look how it does come . . . What is it,' she demanded with sudden fierceness, 'that does give what little luck there is to fools . . . ? Not a soul ever give me nothing a-tall, a-tall. I always had to make my own luck. And look at he! Somebody dead so and he got ground so. Got

land now!' She broke off and slowly lapsed into a dull bewilderment (p. 29).

She does not stop to consider the possibility of a happy resolution to the problem. When she tells her friends about the land, Silla swears that she will find a way to do something, to make Deighton sell it for the house in Brooklyn. That resolve begins Silla's long worrying and scheming process, which makes it impossible for her to escape her frustration.

Silla's failure to be at ease with herself, and therefore escape the blues, is duplicated again very late in the novel. Through scheming, she does manage to get Deighton's land sold, but the proceeds do not go toward the house; Deighton spends the more than nine hundred dollars, playing the big man in all the shops on Fifth Avenue, buying gifts for his family. Later, an accident at work causes him to leave his family and join a cult, an action which leads Silla to have him deported; he dies on the way to Barbados. The effect of all these actions upon Silla is reflected in what she does when she is finally alone:

Every morning she [Selina] found the mother at the table, sometimes asleep or simply staring down into a cup that had long since been emptied. For days the bed upstairs remained untouched, dust sown like fine seeds on the rose satin bedspread. Instead of sleeping she cleaned at night—Selina would hear the vacuum cleaner's whine in her sleep—and studied a course in practical nursing, since she worked in a hospital now that the war plant had closed. She would be studying in the kitchen, yet the lights in all the rooms, the halls, even the chandelier in the parlor would be burning, giving the high-ceilinged rooms with their gilt and rich wood a festive air. Often she fell asleep amid the books on the table or stumbled with exhaustion into the dining room and slept, fully clothed, in one of the stiff-back chairs, her body braced (pp. 199-200).

The Saturday sessions with the other women *do* offer a change from this pattern of behavior, but they are still limited in what they can offer to help Silla reclaim her peace of mind. At night, she tries again and again to exorcise her demons—always unsuccessfully; there is little psychological comfort in what she does and no purging effect. She sleeps from exhaustion, not from peace.

Her life is a round of routine that she clings to for lack of anything else. Unlike Suggie Skeete, the Bajan tenant in the Boyce house who takes a different lover every weekend in order to combat her loneliness,

Silla never considers taking a lover. She is not too unlike black American women in her ability to bear her "crosses"; she has, however, rejected the balm of the church, which could have provided a relief comparable to the blues, though she still espouses some of its tenets. Silla's pristine moral attitude toward Suggie is another example of her desire to escape what is most foreign in her Bajan heritage. Suggie Skeete is a woman who loves life, making love, and drinking rum, and she has no use for frustration. She is a woman who loved the romantic side of Barbados when she was there, but who has accepted its loss to her; yet, she can still think of it in nostalgic, comforting ways that are unavailable to Silla. From Silla's point of view, the sooner the traces of home are wiped away, as soon as the traces of cutting cane and the smell of salt fish (which Suggie loves and cooks) have been cleaned from the brownstones of Brooklyn, the better. One of her crosses is that Deighton does not share her dream and will not work as other Bajan husbands will toward acquiring that much-coveted house.

Another of Silla's crosses, and one that contributes further to her frustration and to her general dissatisfaction with the way things are in her life, is her daughter Selina. The novel is ostensibly the story of Selina's maturation, a growth which is often in direct opposition to the mother's notion of how her Bajan-American daughter should be raised. Initially, Selina has not adopted the materialistic values of the mother; nor is she concerned about appearances. Her closeness to Deighton makes her the natural polite enemy of Silla and Ina, who form a separate alliance. Selina's sensitivity toward and identification with Deighton, as well as her sharing his dream to build a house on the land he has inherited, make her judge her mother harshly at many points in the novel. It also makes her unforgiving of the mother's action in the deportation scene. To Silla, who loves her difficult daughter and is hesitantly respectful of the very independence which she finds so aggravating in Selina, the prospect of not being forgiven adds to her overall frustration.

The peculiar blend of love, hate, and respect which Selina and Silla have for each other, as well as the dreadful power Selina feels in her mother's presence, can be seen in several scenes in the novel. All are confrontations in which mother and daughter continually test their love for each other as well as their power over each other. One such scene occurs when the mother tries to get information from Selina about Deighton's plans for the land in Barbados (Deighton had first shared the news with Selina). Selina finds herself almost impaled by the mother's insistent stare, "outwardly . . . unyielding," but "frightened by the thought of those memories [of Barbados] always clashing within the mother. She was afraid that they would rend the mother soon and

kill her finally, and she would be left without her. The world would collapse then, for wasn't the mother, despite all, its only prop?" (p. 46). The two cannot live with each other nor without each other. Their continuing war eventually leads Silla to evict Suggie, who has become Selina's friend, and to frighten Miss Mary, an elderly white woman tenant who is also Selina's friend. But their conflict leads even more directly to Silla's having Deighton deported, for which Selina beats her fists against Silla's chest one night and repeatedly calls her "Hitler." The mother takes the beating and watches passively until her daughter falls wearily into sleep. In that scene, Silla again experiences the mixture of emotions that her daughter evokes in her.

Slowly Silla lowered her face and gingerly touched the sore places on her shoulders and arms. She stared down, with a strange awe and respect, at the limp figure huddled against her and the thin arms wound loosely around her neck. Carefully she lifted Selina's legs over the footboard, and with the sheet trailing behind them she carried her out of the room, up through the dim hall to the parlor, and turned on the chandelier. For a long while she sat quietly holding her on the sofa under the brilliant light. Then, almost reverently, she touched the tears that had dried white on her dark skin, traced with her finger the fragile outline of her face and rested her hand soothingly on her brow. She smoothed her snarled hair. Yet, despite her tenderness and wonder and admiration of her touch, there was a frightening possessiveness. Each caress declared that she was touching something which was finally hers alone (p. 185).

Silla can show emotion with the exhausted, sleeping Selina and can claim her as her own now that Deighton is gone, but the morrow brings no repetition of the night's emotions. Selina is fifteen when this scene occurs; the mother does not mention it again until Selina is twenty.

An interesting note on the claiming/rejecting between Silla and Selina is Marshall's reference to Silla as "the" mother, never as Selina's mother. There is something in Silla which precludes a closeness in the mother/daughter relationship, something which is increased by Selina's growth into womanhood and natural distance from her mother. As one of Silla's crosses, then, Selina represents another area in which Silla desires ultimate release, the ultimate peace of the man sleeping like a rock, but which is denied to her.

Silla keeps reaching for something that will bring satisfaction to her family as well as to herself. She loses Deighton about mid-way through

the novel, and she keeps on confronting a maze of obstacles. She buys the brownstone which they have been leasing, converts a couple of larger rooms into smaller ones, and begins charging outrageous amounts for rent. She finds herself lurking in hallways trying to control the amount of electricity tenants use, as well as their behavior. She gets a job in a hospital and decides to become a practical nurse. She joins the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen and becomes one of the leaders. Still, she is without the support of Selina or of Ina. Ina buries herself in the church and in her coming marriage to an "acceptable," nondescript young Bajan. Selina embarrasses Silla by going to an Association meeting and telling the young people there that their Association "stinks." Selina then disgraces her mother by having an affair with a man eleven years her senior. That in itself would not be so bad except for the questionable character of the man Selina has chosen; he is not the "safe" type that the aspiring Bajan women want for their potentially professional daughters. Clive is "a man that wun work! That does call heself painting pictures" and "wuthless" (p. 259). He has caused his mother much pain by failing to become the professional she sacrificed so much for him to become. Now, to Silla, her own daughter is throwing similar aspirations back into her face.

The ultimate outrage, though, is Selina's return to the Association. She apologizes for her initial behavior, becomes a model young professional aspirant, and plans to win the scholarship the Association will give. The only problem is that she plans to take the money and go away with Clive, after she has told Silla that she is no longer seeing him. Selina changes her mind about Clive, but on the night the scholarship is awarded to her, she further disgraces Silla by telling the truth about her scheming and by returning the scholarship. The last confrontation between the mother and the daughter is no less tinged with frustration than the previous ones, but the mother at least finally accepts what she cannot change. She calls Selina's actions "spitework," maintains that she "never had no uses" for Silla, and asserts that Selina thought "the sun rose and set 'pon yuh father alone" (p. 305). Selina admits to all, that she has blamed the mother, but she has also grown beyond that. She then announces her plans to go away alone.

Silla's pained eyes searched her [Selina's] adamant face, and after a long time a wistfulness softened her mouth. It was as if she somehow glimpsed in Selina the girl she had once been. For that moment, as the softness pervaded her and her hands lay open like a girl's on her lap, she became the girl who had stood, alone and innocent, at the ship's rail, watching the city rise glittering with promise from the sea.

'G'long,' she said finally with a brusque motion. 'G'long! You was always too much woman for me anyway, soul. And my own mother did say two head-bulls can't reign in a flock. G'long! Her hand sketched a sign that was both a dismissal and a benediction. 'If I din dead yet, you and your foolishness can't kill muh now!' (p. 307)

Resignation would perhaps be a more appropriate description than dismissal or benediction. Silla must finally give up what she can never possess. In so doing she must now confront the loneliness of old age (Ina will shortly be married and out of the house). Quietly, she lets go because she has to, not because that letting go represents any ultimate purging for her.

Selina's growth is vividly traced in the novel; Silla also grows, but she does not change very much. The measure of that growth can be seen in the conversations she has with the other Bajan women with whom she spends most of her social diversions, and with whom she reveals her deepest feelings. In that first conversation with one of them, she maintained that she would somehow get Deighton to sell the land in Barbados. That initial resolution became all-consuming, as a subsequent conversation shows. It illustrates what is most narrow-minded and ugly in Silla at the same time that it shows a driving determination. One of her friends, Florrie Trotman, suggests that perhaps Silla is becoming too overwrought about the land, perhaps she should forget about it:

'Forget it?' Silla's laugh drowned her warning. 'I just now start to think 'bout it. Everybody buying and I still leasing? Oh no, Florrie. I gon fix he and fix he good. I gon show the world that Silla ain nice!'

With that she raised her arms, her body reared, and as she stood there pledging her whole self while the others sat struck silent, the day changed. . . . 'Selina,' Florrie Trotman whispered nervously, 'get yuh mother some water.' . . . Silla did not shift from her threatening pose but simply glared down at [Selina]. Then quickly she swooped, her hand struck, knocking the glass from Selina's hand, and grasping her close, she whispered between closed teeth. 'If I was to hear one word outta you 'bout what I said here today I gon kill you. You hear? I gon kill you even though you's my child and I suffered plenty pain to bring you . . . ' (p. 76).

Selina says nothing, and the mother, sensing "the old resistance that so infuriated" her, pretends that she is not going to do anything to Deighton. Selina's intuition and later events in the novel will prove that Silla's initial declaration was indeed true.

At this point, Silla is like the tightly drawn bow; she is constricted with frustration and the inability to release it. She seems heartless, ruthless, utterly vindictive. She is driven by those forces which beckon her to become more American than the Jewish families for whom many of the women work and whose codes of industry and acquisition of property are especially appealing. She thinks she has accomplished her goal when the check arrives from Barbados; she even softens to the point of allowing Deighton to sleep with her the night before he is scheduled to cash the check. When he spends the money, her sense of fighting alone is brought back to her. Never again does she trust Deighton, and never again does she swerve from her single-minded course of moving up in American society. "I'll get it," she says to Deighton of the house, "And as God is my witness I gon get you too . . . And I wun make mistakes this time. I wun let a Judas smile and Judas words in the night and thing to turn me foolish. You could touch me and it would be like touching stone . . . Nothing, nothing gon stop me. I gon steel my heart and bide my time and see you dead-dead at my feet!" (p.131). Still, as time goes on, and even as she accomplishes her goals, she seems subtly aware of the pain and loss she experiences within her own family, as well as in her humanity.

When one of the neighbors gives her daughter a huge wedding, doing things "like the white people," it is a somber Silla who joins in the conversation of her friends when they toast the house she has acquired without Deighton's help.

With the glasses at their lips, they waited for Silla to respond. But her face was still abstracted; her eyes rested on the men at the bar. She searched among them with the wistfulness almost of a young girl, and a look, as brief as her eyelids dropping, mirrored in that fragment of time a deep ache inside her. Suddenly she pushed away her glass and lashed out, 'What is the old house for wunna to make such a fuss over it, nuh? Houses! That's all the talk. Houses! When you does have to do some of everything short of murder to get them sometimes. I tell you, I tired enough hearing about them . . . ' (pp. 142-143).

In Silla's brief look may be mirrored the knowledge of everything she has lost (Deighton has not accompanied them to the wedding, but

will show up later, only to be rejected by a dancing, laughing Silla). The women question Silla about her mood, conclude that she is "taking on 'bout Deighton," and wait for it to change. Although the change does come, Silla has difficulty trying to recapture that old self, and her increasing conscience, although it does not alter her behavior significantly, is nonetheless an indication of the rage that prevents her from ever experiencing cathartic release.

The years continue to take their toll on the mother. Selina is fifteen when the wedding occurs; five years later, at a meeting of the Association, the accumulated grief which has been caused by Silla's actions is even more vivid in the conversation she has with her women friends about the problems they have with boarders:

'People got to make their own way. And nearly always to make your way in this Christ world you got to be hard and sometimes misuse others, even your own. Oh, nobody wun admit it. We don't talk about it, but we does live by it—each in his own way. C'dear, Iris, I know you feel sorry for the roomers. Even Florrie does, despite her talk. You think I like myself when I'm in the hall getting on like a black-guard with them? But Iris, if it wasn't for them you wun be in Crown Heights today . . . ' Her voice suddenly lapsed, her thick hands lay open and tragic on her lap, her face sank deep into the fur collar. Then she said, very simply, 'We would like to do different. That's what does hurt and shame us so. But the way things arrange we can't, if not we lose out. . . . No, nobody wun admit it, but people got a right to claw their way to the top and those on top got a right to scuffle to stay there. Take this world. It wun always be white. No, mahn. It gon be somebody else turn soon—maybe even people looking near like us. But plenty gon have to suffer to bring it about. And when they get up top they might not be so nice either, 'cause power is a thing that don't make you nice' (p. 224, 225).

Silla's philosophy is that of the driven capitalist, not of the humanitarian. She has accepted the tenets of the American Dream to the point of exploitation of people (especially Blacks from the American South) and, though she may sympathize with them, she is so intent upon retaining the power she has acquired that it is impossible for her to give total sway to her conscience. Her plight is especially destructive because she has adopted the values of an avaricious society which has not shown her in turn how to rid herself completely of conscience. Though she may act as if she does not care, in reality she does; thus the frustrated state of her blues condition continues. She has grown in her knowledge

of herself and of the actions of the people with whom she identifies, but she has not grown to the point of accepting the changes which should be dictated by such knowledge. She continues to give up something of her humanity by her refusal to change, and that perfect control of one's destiny, that inability to give oneself up to the release of music or of love, is what insures that her state of the blues will never find an outlet.