



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Una Marson's Cultivation of Community in her Poetic Works

Jamaican-born early 20th century activist and multi-genre writer, Una Marson (1905-1965) writes poetry in which she shares with audiences scenes from her life in Jamaica and England through the eyes of a black woman. There is a sense of longing for home that reverberates through much of her poetry as she conveys the complexities of her diasporic experience. Marson's career trajectory shows that she pursued her goals as a creative writer in spite of the reality that many of the roles she embarked on were ones that black women had previously been shut out from. In a similar vein as Phillis Wheatley, who created space as the first published African American woman poet, Marson was a trailblazer, helping to lay the vital foundation for the Jamaican woman writer, though in her lifetime large scale recognition for her wide-ranging creative works eluded her. Marson may not have achieved the notoriety that her work arguably warranted, but her efforts made an impact. As one of the first published West Indian women poets who at various times in her life also held the roles of playwright, radio host, and public speaker, Marson reimagined the role of the Jamaican woman at home and abroad. This by no means came easy, and Marson left Jamaica in order to heighten her chances at achieving many of her goals.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

In this article, I will examine Marson's life in Jamaica and her diasporic experience in England as reflected in her poetry. More specifically, I will analyze selected poems published between 1930 and 1944, and consider the effect of these poems in creating out of her readers groups of insiders and outsiders. I identify an insider/outsider as one who can be categorized as being a part of a community (insider), or excluded from a community (outsider), based on their proximity to established understandings within the group. I will show how creating this dynamic between the audience and poet leads to community building. By interrogating some key tools Marson uses in her poems to communicate with her audience, I intend to demonstrate that her openness to exposing individual hardships helps to provide a representational voice for those experiencing similar effects of colonialism and patriarchal societal structures. Marson thus encourages multiple communities to form, unified in their desire to resist social structures and write themselves into the landscape of what it means to be postcolonial. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," Gayatri Spivak offers a helpful lens to consider the various ways imperialism continues to impact the identity of the subaltern, specifically women. Spivak states "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (Spivak, 61). Useful to my considerations of the various ways Marson’s work subverts oppressive forces, Spivak emphasizes the importance of voices often muted and the many layers of oppression such individuals have to navigate. Marson’s poetic contributions reflect a desire to combat potential erasure in a world not made for or desiring to accommodate her efforts as she makes her voice heard in all its complexity.

Marson’s range of poetic themes vary from life outside of Jamaica to concepts of beauty in multiple contexts, and they reflect a desire to connect with an audience that understands or wishes to understand her struggle and the complexities of black womanhood across nations. I argue that even though Marson opens doors and provides foundational tools to contribute to an easier path for black women artists who would follow her, she struggles in her pursuit of building community. This perceived disconnect in community building, I believe aids in feelings of displacement and nostalgia, evident in her poetry. The framework for my analysis is built through the topics Marson presents in her work, the geographical location she comes from and moves to, and the communities she reflects. As Stuart Hall states, “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ positioned” (Hall, 222-223). Hall brings our attention to the direct



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

connection between a writer's work and the moment in time and the space they find themselves in. Through Marson's poetry, we capture important aspects of her changing environment in relocating from Jamaica to England and insight into her diasporic experience. Regarding Marson's oeuvre, Alison Donnell points out that "The unutterable strangeness of reality and her attempt to express the subjectivizing co-experience of that reality...was intimately bound to the political conditions of her modernity and alienation as a black woman in both Jamaica and London. I aim to further position Marson's poetic contributions as influential to colonial discourses and get to a more intimate reading of her work through focus on community building in her poetry, because this is a corpus that begs for such readings. In her poetry, Marson shares personal struggles and joys about her condition of diasporic subject, a condition linked to her identity as a woman; importantly, she does it at a time when black women's voices in the public arena were severely limited.

Marson's Jamaica, 1930

The poems collected in *Tropic Reveries*, Una Marson's 1930 book debut, share with an imagined public about life in Jamaica. Through these poems, we get a glimpse into how Marson views her homeland. This view is particularly evident in the poem "Jamaica" which, providing what a foreign gaze might expect of the tropics, conveys a



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

picturesque scene as the speaker walks us through elements of island life that are beautiful and pleasant:

All hail to thee! Fair island of the West,
Where thy dear people are forever blest
With beauteous gifts from nature's blessed hand,
Lavished in rich profusion o'er the land,
Welcome be all who journey many a mile
To share the joys of this our lovely isle:
Fond nature still invites, -- 'Come, be my guest
And I will give thee gladness, peace and rest!' (56)

The four stanzas of the poem are deeply invested in emphasizing the natural beauty of the island and even pose an invitation to visitors in the last two lines: "-- 'Come, be my guest / And I will give thee gladness, peace and rest'" (56). Given Jamaica's tortured history at the hands of colonizers, it might be difficult to understand the carefree nature of the poem in the context of the early 20th century. Yet, Marson's choice to open the poem with "All hail to thee! / Fair island of the West," prompts readers to consider Jamaica in a privileged position, worthy of respect from the "All" she identifies. There seems to be a stark contrast between the reality of pre-independent Jamaica and the invitation to enjoy the lush flora and fauna of the country, especially since the poem was written by a black Jamaican woman. As Marson's "Jamaica" was published prior to



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

her move to England, we can also gather that distance from the country does not likely inform the sentimentality of the poem.

A less skeptical reading of the poem might insist that the speaker is only singing the praises of a beautiful country. In her introduction to Marson's *Selected Poems*, Alison Donnell identifies Marson's representation of Jamaica in this poem as a "troubled allusion to an Edenic vision," and points to other poems in *Tropic Reveries* that offer more depth and complexities than "a vision of natural opulence which balances on the very edge of stereotype" (29). Donnell identifies these seemingly contradictory elements in Marson's work. Still, there seems to be something else happening in Marson's "Jamaica"; the irony, in addition to the sentimentality of the speaker's personal connection to homeland, is certainly worth investigating. In extending the reading of this poem I wish to consider the speaker in relation to the historical time, place, and audience.

Though many of Marson's early poems focus on romantic love and the dynamics of such relationships, another focus emerges in Marson's poem "Jamaica," the love and adoration for her home country, a love that is arguably also romantic. Yet, given the colonial status of the country in 1930, how might we reconcile this reality of oppression



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

with Marson's romanticized version of Jamaica in this poem? We might gather that Marson may have aimed to write what the poetry reading public seemed to gravitate to at the time which would have been based on what was already popular. C.L.R. James notes that much of the best writing from the West Indies up until the late 1960's was "seen through a European-educated literary sieve" (Donnell & Welsh, 165). James' statement encourages us to consider the effect of deprioritizing one's own cultural lens in favor of the colonizing country. The violence of colonization can rob members of the colonized country of seeing their value. This begs the question: who was the imagined public for Marson in this poem written early in her career, and was Marson only mimicking the popular style of the time seen through the above-mentioned sieve and thus excluding those outside of the European-educated élite?

Marson's "Jamaica" is doing more than jotting down observations of the beautiful land she lives in. The paradise personified in the poem also discloses that Marson belonged to the Jamaican middle-class and lived a more economically stable life than many Jamaicans. Marson was in fact a daughter of a Baptist parson. In his memoir *Familiar Stranger*, Stuart Hall explains this life of the Jamaican middle-class in the mid-1900's as one "constrained by those multiple grids of class, status, colour, subordination



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

and dependency which were the lifeblood of the subaltern middle-class imaginary” (58). Hall’s use of the word “imaginary” insists on the interrogation of the very systems that operate based on the falsehoods of security that constructs such as class and color reproduce. If we apply this notion to the Jamaica that Marson constructs in her poem, we will notice that the scene enacted in this ‘lovely isle’ reflects a privileged social status. Hall’s framing of the Jamaican middle class makes the ease and carefree nature of Marson’s “Jamaica” easier to understand for it reflects elements of an idealized Jamaica. However, the world Marson creates in the poem is not as confined to a subjective “middle-class imaginary” as it first appears. Through her words, Marson is also drawing a line between what I refer to as insiders and outsiders. In this particular poem, insiders are those who call the land home and outsiders those classified as visitors or onlookers. Marson’s use of the word “guest” presents a distancing of self from visitors. The very politeness of the word might require for outsiders to be on their best behavior, but the word also implies accommodation for those guests as distinct from insiders. There is a community being created here. The poem reveals the insiders through the author’s seeming connection to those belonging to the community in which the poet identifies, in this case Marson’s fellow country people. Outsiders are those who



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

do not belong to that community and will only access the country through a lens of belonging elsewhere. However, readers may be left to wonder: who is tasked to provide “guests” with “gladness, peace and rest”? In raising the question of audience and the question of who belongs to Marson’s Jamaica, participating individuals are positioned as players in a scene where each member is called to behave accordingly.

Marson as Insider and Outsider

Value is placed on respect and politeness in the poem “Jamaica.” But the speakers in many of Marson’s England focused poems do not get afforded such kindness. After making her way to England in search of career advancement, Marson faced many challenges. Donnell notes that “arriving in 1932, [Marson] came to Britain twenty years before mass immigration”, termed the Windrush Generation (1948-1971), and “before the flourishing of West Indian literary voices and before the recognised presence of a difference had ‘creolised the metropole’” (qtd in Schwarz, 116). This meant that if Marson were to succeed in England, she would have to blaze her own trail and produce creative work within an unfamiliar space less welcoming to a black woman. Attempting to come to terms with her new diasporic existence would result in part in the composition of deeply reflective poems centered on racial inequality and gender bias. Marson essentially had to extend her ideas of community in this new environment as she no



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

longer had the familiarities of her home country. Life as a Jamaican in England is a common topic in Marson's poetry, which exposes the struggles she faced while living there, including racism, colorism and (as a result of these forms of oppression), homesickness.

Once Marson moved to England, the scope of her passion for black advancement and ideas of community is broadened. While in England, her work engages a more global sense of community and the various barriers to black advancement within and outside Jamaica. Particularly important to revealing her sense of community are the many poetic works that demonstrate aspects of her lived experience and observations in both Jamaica and England, sometimes at the expense of the communities she had established in prior works. Put another way, Marson took on various topics in her poetry that reflected on her new environment in England, but these topics largely moved away from ones her initial core audience would have been used to when she was based in Jamaica. These earlier poems primarily focused on "romantic love and the natural world" (Donnell, 14). Poems such as "Quashie Goes to London," "Kinky Hair Blues", and "Little Brown Girl" that I go on to discuss below, reflect a move towards more socially conscious topics. After leaving Jamaica, Marson's poetry shifts focus, potentially alienating readers who were used to the content of her earlier work and arguably making it more difficult for her to find support.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

The wide range of influence on Marson's work is conveyed through the poetic forms she engages, though some criticism frames this as a negative in understanding her work. Donnell points out that some scholars have categorized Marson's poetry "according to oppositional poetic and political modes: either sentimental or polemical, feminine or feminist, resistant or complicit" (12). Seemingly difficult to categorize, her style and ideological stance suggest that Marson desired to communicate with a variety of communities. On a biographical level, her roles sometimes differed based on her location and, according to this, she catered to multiple audiences. It is helpful to consider here, what Homi Bhabha deems a "migrant culture of the in-between" which finds the migrant in a liminal space. Bhabha writes, "This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the 'survival' of migrant life" (321). Necessarily, new ways of being and seeing come about as a result of the migrant's experience. This new way of seeing, or perceived 'in-between-ness' is evident in the poetry Marson produces once in England. Marson's poem "Quashie Comes to London" from *The Moth and the Star*, for instance, positions the speaker as a foreign observer of "de English". Marson uses the character Quashie to reflect on some



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

difficulties of being from the Caribbean and adapting to England. The speaker states “Cause I come quite here to Englan’ / Fe see wid me own eye” (17). Throughout the poem the reader gets the impression that the speaker doesn’t view their current environment as home and longs to return elsewhere. Marson writes “It’s den I miss me home sweet home / Me good ole rice an’ peas / An I say I is fool fe come / To dis lan’ of starve an’ sneeze” (21). The speaker is called to comment on what they see and experience in England, but always with the knowledge that they are not from there and are never without that difference. Marson’s poetry, it seems, sought to connect with particular communities that, like her, struggled with belonging after leaving the familiarity of their homeland. As it was the case for many writers of color in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s coming from the US and the Caribbean, Britain often provided more opportunities than their home countries (Douglas, 232). In leaving her familiar homeland in Jamaica, Marson would find herself as an outsider in England. However, as a Jamaican in England, she maneuvered her way through multiple contexts and talked to various publics as a public intellectual, cross-genre writer, and radio host at the BBC. This migration from a colonized yet familiar homeland to the land of the colonizer inevitably meant that Marson would be faced with new challenges. Marson, I



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

argue, built community through her work and connection to readers of her work in these vastly different spaces, though her ability to do that community building effectively and consistently was at times tested.

Marson's Developing Self in Diaspora

Longing for Jamaica is a common theme in Marson's poetry. The author clearly struggled with acclimating to her new environment, writing many poems about missing the island. She also wrote about the struggles in England that made her miss her home country. Poems like "In Jamaica," "Home Thoughts," and the aptly titled "Nostalgia," find the poet reminiscent and it is clear that the country, in spite of its political, economic, and social issues, held some of her sweetest memories. Her position, as a diaspora subject and artist, is clarified by what James Clifford asserts in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*: "Whatever their eschatological longings, diaspora communities are 'not here to stay.' Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (255). Clifford points to the struggle of belonging for transnational persons. This "lived tension" is evident in Marson's poetry, as her



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

home country becomes more appealing due to the tough experiences she has in England. Donnell notes that Marson was not trying to escape her homeland, as many of her male peers did at the time. Instead, “For [Marson], the journeys to Britain were prompted more by an awareness of the need to see Jamaica as part of the larger colonial, Caribbean, and later African, picture” (116). Marson, therefore, saw a possibility for her small home island to be a part of larger conversations within the world, seeing England as a gateway to actualizing this. Nonetheless, though Jamaicans were members of the British empire, they were far removed from Britain and from the image white British people associated themselves with. Marson would find that the hardships of living as a stranger in a new land were compounded by the fact that her skin color meant that she would immediately be identified as an outsider. In considering community building, the role of the body in helping to construct that community requires us to also think about society’s influence in shaping the individual’s view of self. In many of Marson’s poems, the fictional poetic representation has much in common with aspects of Marson’s biography. At various times her poems consider the brown body in the context of a very white and unwelcoming England where the subject has to endure anti-black racism.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

In a radical move, Marson boldly confronts the subject of anti-black racism and its damaging emotional effects in her poem “Nigger,” published in *The Keys* magazine in 1933. The publication was edited by Marson for The League of Coloured Peoples, an organization formed by physician Dr. Harold Moody “which began to campaign for full civil rights for black people in Britain, and which came increasingly to condemn white racial superiority in the empire overseas” (Schwarz, 52). In line with the magazine’s focus on black advancement, Marson’s poem takes on a factor obstructing advancement: the cruel treatment of black people by whites in England. Marson confronts the oppressive history of the word, “nigger,” and the pejorative usage through the poem’s speaker, who attempts to come to terms with an experience that diminishes their sense of self. The poem finds the speaker in deep reflection when the slur is used against them as the poem begins, “They called me ‘Nigger’” (85). The poem moves to share with the audience information about who the offenders were, people who are identified as “little white urchins”. The use of the word “urchin” calls to mind a mischievous child or spiny sea creature. The insult, “little white urchins,” is used to counter those who have attempted to dehumanize the speaker. Through a skilful use of pronouns, Marson wills the reader to familiarize themselves with the experience of being



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

othered, as evidence by the following quotes: “They laughed and shouted / As I passed along the street, / They flung it at me: / ‘Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!’” As Margo Jefferson states in her *New York Times* article “Revisions; Labels Change, Carrying Different Emotional Baggage”, “if names didn’t matter, the groups with power wouldn’t have so many insulting names for the groups without it” (867). Marson conveys the disgust in the voices of the taunting children and the anger of the speaker who looks inward to question the resistance to retaliate violently, asking in the second stanza, “What made me keep my fingers / From choking the words in their throats?” (85). In posing this question to the audience, Marson calls out to a community of supporters, people who can sympathize or empathize. The next few lines find the speaker still questioning why the word triggered so many conflicting emotions. The speaker asks two additional questions:

What made my face grow hot,
The blood boil in my veins
And tears spring to my eyes?
What made me go to my room
And sob my heart away
Because white urchins
Called me “Nigger”? (85)



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Marson conveys the flux of emotions: this time the pain the speaker feels prompts them to resort again to their own name calling.

The speaker does not appear to be the subservient and scared recipient of the verbal blows that these taunters might desire, however. The speaker's anger rises just below the point of action. The poem does not reference the potential recourse of actions that a black person in the society would have to endure if they were to act on their feelings of anger in such a situation. Instead, it dwells in the very emotions the words conjure for black people and the insistence of British white people to continue using and weaponizing the word. Marson tells the reader that it was the speaker's willpower that saved the verbal attackers from a physical altercation when she writes "tears spring to my eyes". Instead of allowing the taunters to see the effect of their words, the speaker waits to return to their room to cry. There is a sense here that the speaker does not want to give the offenders the satisfaction of seeing the pain they caused.

The effect of reader's involvement is increased in the third stanza, in which the poet suggests that the speaker does have a choice in how to respond. Marson writes, "What makes the dark West Indian / Fight at being called a Nigger?" (85). Even in this



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

experience meant to reduce the speaker on the basis of a racializing process of identification, the speaker finds agency in articulating this choice to not allow the taunters to see physical manifestations of anger by fighting or crying. The strength of the speaker in this moment is a facade, but a necessary one for them to maintain control in the situation they have been forced into. Though the speaker does not act on their anger, their true desires are shown through the poem. We are made to see their strength even though the “little white urchins” could not. The emergence of a strong sense of identity in a situation of racial violence is in line with what Zora Neale Hurston writes in her 1928 essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me”: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (215). The words *flung* at the speaker can be seen as an enactment of what Hurston refers to as “a sharp white background” -- here, it is that word that disrupts the speaker’s life and dehumanizes them.

The third stanza of the poem focuses outward to a community under perpetual attack, knowing that what the speaker has experienced is a common part of the black experience in England. The initial line of questioning continues: “What makes the dark West Indian / Fight at being called Nigger? / What is there in that word / That should strike like a dagger / To the heart of Coloured men / And make them wince”? (85). The



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

stressed sounds at the beginning of the words “What makes the dark West Indian” followed by the word “Fight...” in the next line, create a powerful sonic force within the poem. Additionally, the break between the two lines causes an enjambment that first speaks to the humanity of the “dark West Indian” and then questions, “Fight at being called Nigger?” It is as if the speaker wonders if the word should have as much power as it does, while still recognizing the inevitability of its painful effects. Still, through this move to consider the pain of other black people who have a history of oppression triggered through hearing the word, Marson shares the collective pain of the community. The speaker is shown as a representative of a larger body politic experiencing the hurtful nature of the word. Marson starts the fourth stanza, shifting the address by turning outward writing, “You of the white skinned Race / You who profess such innocence.” Whereas earlier in the poem Marson primarily conveys the painful experience within the black community regarding the word and its implications, she moves in the fourth stanza to point fingers, blatantly calling out this cruel action from white people. Here, the reader is distanced and identified by “You”. Marson calls out the audacity of guilty parties to “profess such innocence”. We see through these instances that Marson has made clear the division between those who



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

understand the pain of the speaker and those who don't so that when we encounter the opening line of the sixth stanza "We will not be called "Niggers," it is clear who Marson has pulled into this circle of insiders to take a stand. The turn to include the word "we" and the forceful nature of the act of volition ("will not") tell outsiders that this proclamation is on behalf of a group with whom the speaker feels solidarity. Marson also infers that black solidarity is bolstered through the religious alliance she includes in the poem:

God keep my soul from hating such mean souls,
God keep my soul from hating
Those who preach the Christ
And say with churlish smile
"This place is not for Niggers." (86)

Here, the speaker and God are made to be on the same side as the speaker wills for help in not being moved to hate the "mean souls" though they have provided good reason throughout the poem as to why such a feeling would be warranted.

In a similar manner, the poem "Another Mould," from Marson's 1931 collection, *Heights and Depths*, pointedly addresses white society in confronting the societal norm of white supremacy. Marson writes, "You can talk about your babies / With blue eyes



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

and hair of gold, / But I'll tell you bout an angel / That's cast in another mould" (77).

The lines negate the ideals of white beauty, she writes, "She is brown just like a biscuit / And she has the blackest eyes / That don't for once remind you / Of the blue of tropic skies". Throughout this poem, Marson shows the audience that the "brown skin cherub" is the speaker's preference and sweet in her own right; however, the reference to "the blue of tropic skies" reminds us that, in spite of the stated intention, the comparison to white beauty standards still exists. The speaker counterpoints black beauty aesthetics to Eurocentric ones, conveying a sense of the far-reaching control of white supremacy. In this poem there is a clear desire to hold the beauty of the brown child as enough; hold her to the light, though the societal constraints remain in spite of the intention.

The confidence Marson tries to instill in the "brown skin cherub" is rather difficult to come by. Though Marson speaks words of affirmation in "Another Mould," she exposes the struggle tied to that confidence in "Kinky Hair Blues" from her 1937 collection, *The Moth and the Star*. It is important to note that, in including the reference to the American musical form of the blues within the title of the poem, Marson draws connections to a wider audience that is unified by the social struggle placed upon those



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

who have kinky hair. In her book *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*, Denise deCaires Narain notes several additional occurrences of Marson's reference to the blues in her poems that "experiment with the African American speech rhythms and musical influences characteristic of the work of Langston Hughes and others involved in the Harlem Renaissance" (24). This move is in line with Marson's desire to reach a wider audience, engaging various groups of black people outside of Jamaica. In "Kinky Hair Blues," Marson repeats several lines like a mantra that exposes the speaker's feelings of being stuck between loving herself for who she is and wishing to have physical features that she feels would be more likely to get her romantic attention from men. The poem starts,

Gwine find a beauty shop
Cause I ain't a belle.
Gwine find a beauty shop
Cause I ain't a lovely belle.
The boys pass me by,
They say I's not so swell (144)

In these lines, the speaker connotes the male gaze as setting the standard for who is deemed beautiful. The implication here is that the beauty shop can provide what the speaker needs in order to receive the desired attention. Regarding "Kinky Hair Blues,"



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Donnell states, "...the female subject is compelled to sacrifice any belief in her own physical beauty before the act of integration into the heterosexual racist society can take place" (Donnell, 34). Donnell points out the external oppressive actors influencing women's choices on physical appearance; a dilemma represented in this poem by Marson and reflecting a personal struggle of many. In the third stanza Marson writes, "I hate dat ironed hair / And dat bleaching skin," then repeats the two lines encouraging the reader to take notice of this sentiment. The speaker then shares, "But I'll be all alone / If I don't fall in". Here, Marson points to women who have changed their features to remove the kinks from their hair and lighten their skin to find companionship. The skin and hair are treated here as costume as we are privy to the knowledge that the speaker would rather not alter their appearance, but is a victim to the societal pressure of white supremacy. In his description of the broad spectrum of performance to include everyday life, Schechner states, "Usually a person knows when she is playing a role and when she is 'being herself'. To 'be myself' is to behave in a relaxed and unguarded manner. To 'perform myself' means to take on the appearance [of another]" (146). In this sense, a performance of self for Marson would be straightened hair and lightened skin, features that, though undesirable to her, might garner romantic attention. The



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

kinky haired black woman of this poem must alter her appearance to better fit European standards of beauty which are standards that the men she wishes to attract are looking for in their partners. As Marson's *The Moth and the Star* was published after leaving Jamaica, the male gaze of the poem likely belongs to multiple contexts, united in their preference for a light skinned, straight haired woman, and resistance to see beauty in Afro-centric features.

We might read the fifth stanza of "Kinky Hair Blues" as a major shift in the poem when Marson says "I like me black face / And me kinky hair" (91). This can be seen as the speaker performing an act of self-love. By repeating these words, the speaker attempts to give herself the love society tells her she needs. Still, the ending to the poem is one of despair as Marson writes, "Now I's gwine press me hair / And bleach me skin," and after repeating those lines again like a mantra, the poem ends with "What won't a gal do / Some kind a man to win". If companionship is what the speaker in the poem wants, then society has shown that she is not desirable in her current state. The speaker clearly wants to remain as she is but feels pressured to perform another self. While recognizing one's self worth is encouraged in "Another Mould," the poet makes the speaker give voice to her feelings of unworthiness in "Kinky Hair Blues." Together,



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

the two voices reflect the constant struggle black diasporic subjects, and especially women, have to fight in order to subvert white supremacist norms.

Through “Kinky Hair Blues,” Marson shows us a more controversial positioning of herself as both insider and outsider. She treads a fine line here in highlighting a divide within black communities in her effort to devalue the combination of light skin and straightened hair as aspiring to European standards of beauty. The practices that Marson exposes are generally done in the privacy of one’s home or within a small group and those who take part may not want this made public or to be confronted by it. Though her larger project aspires to highlight black beauty and connect to the black community as only an insider could, she threatens to alienate some members of her audience that may disregard or reject Marson’s assertion that they have chosen to change their features to please a skewed male gaze influenced by white social standards. Marson may have risked decreasing her audience by expunging diasporic subjects who were too willing to change themselves to conform to society’s standards. Marson’s “Kinky Hair Blues” is one such poem by Marson that centers on confronting white supremacist thinking and draws connections between black struggle throughout the world. Raj Chetty points out in “Teach his People the Value of Unity,” “The disunity



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

among blacks that Marson perceived--and believed needed to be corrected--represents the different attitudes blacks across the world have taken and continue to take over the very question of the value of black diasporic unity" (23). Chetty brings our attention to Marson's desire to unify black people and it is evident to me that an important aspect of this work for Marson is using her poetry to identify and interrogate common struggles within black communities. In line with this thinking, Marson's "Kinky Hair Blues" motions towards a community of insiders who can not only feel seen and heard through her poem's focus, but inspired to confront these oppressive social norms.

"Little Brown Girl," a poem also included in *The Moth and the Star*, is a reflective poem that, like "Another Mould," conjures images of a brown child. We are disabused of this childlike image as we consider that the interactions Marson shares throughout the poem are not typical of childish behavior, and so we can infer that the subject of the poem is likely an adult belittled through their negative interactions with white people in England. In this poem Marson exposes white curiosity of black bodies, asking the "little brown girl" a series of questions,

Why do you start and wince
When white folks stare at you?



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Don't you think they wonder
Why a little brown girl
Should roam about their city
Their white, white city? (92)

The speaker in this poem is implicit and appears to mock the Londoner through repetition for emphasis when questioning “their city / Their white, white city?” Later in the poem, Marson writes, “And the folks are all white-- / White, white, white,” making it clear how out of place the speaker feels. Returning to Bhabha’s concept of the migrant world vision, Marson’s speaker reflects a “transnational, ‘migrant’ knowledge of the world,” in their navigation of the “white, white city?” as liminal subject (Bhabha, 321). As the speaker appears to be treated as a spectacle, she begins to question her own brown body’s presence in England through the questions placed upon her, such as “What are you seeking, / What would you have?” Throughout the poem, the speaker is scrutinized. Nicole Winsor points out that in this poem “...we encounter an adult speaker who lives on, in the metropole, as a “thing...” (Winsor, 104). Importantly, Winsor brings our attention to the white Londoners' attempt to remake the girl into an object. This move to dehumanize the girl shows her positionality to the interrogators she encounters. Those who would seek to make her into an object and rob her of her



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

humanity are positioned as outsiders and dangerous to the girl's mental well-being.

Further into the poem, the speaker mocks the ignorance of Londoners who might ask,

And from whence are you
Little brown girl?
I guess Africa or India
Ah no, from some island
In the West Indies,
But isn't that India all the same? (94)

It is clear from the sarcasm Marson uses throughout the poem when the speaker imitates the Londoners that she looks upon them with disdain. This disdain is not only for their lack of knowledge of migrants, but also for their seeming disregard for the nuances of difference between brown people and the geographies they represent. When the Londoner assumes the speaker is "from some island," they are also showing their indifference to who she actually is and exposing the superiority that they feel over her.

What the mimicked speaker does care to know, however, is "How is it you speak English as though it belonged to you" and "Would you like to be white little brown girl?" (94). Marson exposes the ignorance and smugness of the interrogators, but through her rhetorical move of sarcasm conveys the idea that she can access a perspective on the situation they would not comprehend. In describing a situation that



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

many black people in the diaspora are likely to have experienced, Marson establishes meaningful connections with members of her audience who, like her, have been subjected to such reductive lines of questioning that pretend to be polite, but are, in fact, racist.

In her 1925 essay, “The Double Task: The Struggle of Women for Sex and Race Emancipation,” Elise Johnson McDougald considers a different set of questions forced on black people. Though she focuses on her experience as a black woman in Harlem, there are similarities to the issues raised through Marson’s poem which is set in a different geographical and historical location. McDougald states,

What then is to be said of the Negro woman today? Here the questions naturally arise: ‘What are her problems?’ and ‘How is she solving them?’ To answer these questions, one must have in mind not any one Negro woman, but rather a colorful pageant of individuals, each differently endowed...With a discerning mind, one catches the multiform charm, beauty, and character of Negro women; and grasps the fact that their problem cannot be thought of in mass. (689)



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

What prevails for both Marson and McDougald is the need to confront the ignorance of the idea of black women as monolithic. This parallel shows that the lack of understanding and will to understand the complexities of black women happens in many contexts. "Little Brown Girl" enacts the dilemma of her diasporic experience wherein the speaker is faced with ignorance from outside sources compounded by the fact that they clearly also question how they are seen in England. Kobena Mercer asserts, "the mixing and fusion of disparate elements to create new, hybridised identities point to ways of surviving and thriving, in conditions of crisis and transition" (5). Mercer elucidates that new identities are formed as a survival mechanism out of necessity, hard times that demand adaptation. Through her poem, Marson gives shape to the complex existence of being a black woman in England during the 1930s, and the questions and sentiments that emerge in this poem speak to a larger community of black migrants in Britain in the early to mid-20th century. What Marson does in this poem is, therefore, sharing her diasporic experience as written out of necessity in order to denounce the racist behaviors of white British people towards black people. Marson exposes her condition as a marginal figure while seeking to connect with those who share in her struggle.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

In much of Marson's poetry, she establishes a close and meaningful connection between her Jamaican origins and her diasporic existence in England. The shifts in how Marson sees herself and how she maneuvers her way through different societal expectations in the contexts of two countries have the potential to trouble readers for its inconsistency. But those who can relate to Marson ultimately remain insiders. Though relationships to community can be fluid, the sense of making common experiences can be used as a power move for the oppressed to create a community where insiders are valued and outsiders are called out and kept outside. This essentially becomes a necessary and revolutionary act---to not only combat white imperialist behaviors, but to also find those with whom one can build community.

Closing Notes

In considering the relationship between poetry, the postcolonial, and formation of community, the impact of time and location becomes evident. The environment Marson finds herself plays a role in reinforcing, and widening, the idea of community evoked by her words. Marson's community is characterized by its embrace of two countries and its adjustment to a foreign culture.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Marson's search for community is revealed through her work as she pushes against the limitations placed on her as a black woman. The varied poetic styles and the shifting notion of community in the aforementioned poems show that Marson struggled to build a group to whom she could belong. This choice, as it relates to language and thematic focus of her poetry, appears to have had an effect on the community drawn to Marson. Marson attempted to cultivate the community she needed, a community that understood her plight and desire to feel at home in a world not designed for her. In this way, the insider/outsider dynamic can be a protective barrier from the outside world keeping in culture and vision and keeping out colonial ideals to various degrees of success.

In addition to conversations on race, colorism, and community building, Marson's work deals with the complex notion of diaspora as both a state of being and becoming. Though Marson's work represents experiences lived in the first half of the 20th century, her words create a dialogue that continues to resonate today because of its relevance to the current social climate and the continued need to subvert white supremacist systems and thinking. Marson's work presents and examines concepts of diaspora as condition and how one's connection to their homeland can change. Marson



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

does this by exposing her experience maneuvering multiple spaces, causing her to negotiate, proclaim, and reclaim parts of her identity in both Jamaica and England.

Tejan Green Waszak

St. John's University



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Chetty, Raj. "'Teach His People the Value of Unity': Black Diaspora, Women, and Una Marson's *Pocomania*." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2016, p. 20-41.

Donnell, "Una Marson and the Fractured Subjects of Modernity," 346.

Donnell, Alison. "Una Marson: Feminism, Anti-Colonialism and a Forgotten Fight for Freedom," *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*. Ed. Bill Schwarz. Manchester University Press, 2003.

Donnell, Alison, and Welsh, Sara, eds. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

deCaires Narain, Denise. *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History: An Autobiography*. New York: Avenel, N.J.: Gramercy Books ; Outlet Book Co., 1993.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Hall, Stuart. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *Encyclopedia of African-American Writing*. Ed. Shari Dorantes Hatch, Grey House Publishing, 2018.

Jefferson, Margo. "Labels Change, Carrying Different Emotional Baggage," *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Jennifer Burton. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.

Johnson McDougald, Elise. "The Double Task: The Struggle of Women for Sex and Race Emancipation," *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Jennifer Burton. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, 2015.

Marson, Una. *Selected Poems*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011.

Marson, Una. *The Moth and the Star*. Kingston: The Author, 1937.

Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York and London: Routledge 1994.

Schwarz, Bill. *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*. Manchester University Press, 2003.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Rosalind Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Taylor, Diana. *Performance*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016.

Winsor, Nicole. "'Like a Dry-Skin Itching for Growth on Our Bodies': Katherine Mansfield's and Una Marson's Modernist Fantasies of Objecthood." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 44, no. 4, Indiana University Press, 2021.