

Blue Notes in Bronzeville

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Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.



Paulette

What good is sun

If I can't run?

"You're eight, and ready

To be a lady."

That is what my Mama says.

She is right again, I guess.

But there! I saw a squirrel fly

Where it is secret, green, and high.

And there! Ants are bustling brown,

And I require to chase them down!

What good is sun

If I can't run?

—Gwendolyn Brooks, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*¹

¹ Brooks, Gwendolyn, and Faith Ringgold. *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*. New York, NY: Amistad, 2015.

Bessie Smith transformed African-American women from sexual objects to sexual subjects.² Nina Simone turned our gaze toward a new world.³ Gwendolyn Brooks made Black children heard.

Brooks' first poetry collection for a young audience, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, a follow-up to *A Street in Bronzeville*, voices the complex daily struggles of thirty-seven Black children in mid-century Chicago. Every poem, titled to honor a different young protagonist, sings the "peculiar experience" of that child.⁴ Read together, the collection animates a "blues matrix" that disrupts a sentimental view of childhood.⁵ With simple language and the cadence of a jump rope hitting the ground, sounding a 12-bar blues track, Brooks sonically evokes loss and desire in the poem "Paulette."

Similar to the musical key of a blues song, the rhetorical question that opens "Paulette" establishes the melancholic tone of the poem. Additionally, the first rhyming and only repeating couplet of "Paulette" amplifies the eight-year-old protagonist's call: "What good is sun/ If I can't run?" Paulette's "Mama" responds in the second couplet, "You're eight, and ready/ To be a lady," implying that her daughter's childhood is ending. The little girl questions her mother's declaration by striking a dissonant blue note, disrupting the AABB rhyming scheme, with the phrase "That is what my Mama says./ She is right again. I guess." The blue note marks the juncture point where Paulette's interior and exterior worlds collide.

The exclamatory phrase at the opening of the fourth couplet, "But there!", summons the reader to listen and observe closely. Additionally, this signals a turn in the poem in which Paulette momentarily reclaims her childhood as she slips into a "secret" space "green and high" where "squirrels fly." As the protagonist's imagination bends and builds, like the strings of a blues guitar, so does the pitch of the poem, making sounds scream with emotion. This "stepping up" drives the mood of blues music, or in this case, the poem. Cacophonous rhyming sounds erupt and intensify in an extended "bend" to magnify Paulette's rebellion: "But there! I saw a squirrel fly/ Where it is secret, green, and high./ And there! Those ants are bustling brown,/ And I require to chase them down!" This

² Russell, Michele. "Slave Codes and Linear Notes." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977).

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Baker, Houston A. In *Blues, Ideology, And Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

sonic device conveys a child's ability to shape and transform oneself through imagination. For an instant, Paulette defies reality to engage in child's play. The poem ends as it begins, in a circular loop that echoes the structure of a 12-bar blues progression. By repeating the opening question, the blues continue to resonate off the page and in the minds of readers.

In Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "Paulette," the reader is compelled to investigate the world, in real-time, through an eight-year-old child's eyes. The act of self-narration centers Paulette and creates an emotional connection between the subject and the audience. By the third verse, the protagonist questions her "Mama's" judgment and illuminates the central theme: a loss of childhood and Paulette's desire to regain it. Brooks uses sonic devices found in blues music—call and response, bends, blue notes, cacophony, rhyming, and repetition—to evoke Paulette's agency and experience.

Children's literature, at its best, offers mirrors, windows, and doors for discovery. The genre mimics, refracts, and defies societal norms. Moreover, children's books can serve as cultural projects and artifacts to shape thought and action. Gwendolyn Brooks animated and amplified the complex lives of Black children in mid-century Chicago so that we may (re)structure our world to hear, see, and honor Paulette and her peers. The challenge remains. Of all the children's literature published in 2018 in the United States, only 11% featured Black children.⁶ Depicting the lives of boys and girls in 1950s Bronzeville was a radical act. It still is.

⁶ "Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color (All Years)." Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/.

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