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**Between Diaspora and Internationalism:
Claude McKay and the Making of a Black Public Intellectual**

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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**Between Diaspora and Internationalism:
Claude McKay and the Making of a Black Public Intellectual**

*"For the line of the one state is the straight line.
The great, divine, exact, wise straight line – the wisest of all lines."*

*-- Y.I. Zamyatin, *We* (1921).*

As flower dust is driven down the wind,
 To touch and quicken the green life of earth,
 As symbolic swallows leave cold lands behind,
 For regions of sweet warmth and singing mirth:
 So shall thy thought be carried surely forth
 To the remotest dwelling of mankind,
 Breaking down obstacles to give new birth,
 New strength, new purpose to man's boundless mind.

CLAUDE MCKAY'S "INTERNATIONAL SOUL" RESONATES WITH EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY optimism, particularly of suffragettes and pacifists. But at the time that it was published in 1928, that optimism was but a memory, as poet Genevieve Taggard noted, of the idealism of a Lost Generation. It now would be, she insisted, difficult in America and elsewhere "to put roots deep into a soil pre-empted by propagandists who insist that the artist bear only one kind of fruit."¹ Political propaganda had, particularly, infiltrated Negro writing, a controversial issue for W.E.B. Dubois, Alain Locke, and others. The New Negro was at its height of popularity, and Harlem would become a titillating showcase for all that the African Diaspora had to offer. Yet McKay excused himself from participating in an esthetic movement that would celebrate American exceptionalism, albeit from a black American

¹ Genevieve Taggard, in her introduction to *May Days: An Anthology of Verse from Masses-Liberator*, published by Boni & Liveright in 1925, the same year Alain Locke published the *New Negro*, p. 14.

perspective. McKay spoke to other concerns and issues. He, too, celebrated Harlem (and criticized it roundly, as well, in *Home to Harlem*, a novel that made W.E.B. DuBois feel unwashed) and the Jazz Age, but he also anticipated a convergence of ideologies and aesthetics within internationalism, a movement that is rarely associated with race.

Victorian imperialism produced many resistance movements, from the local to the global, but internationalism was a key link between the colonized and the racially oppressed. The most popular expression of internationalism was Marxism, but it was by no means its central ideology. Internationalism's appeal occurred at a time when gender and racial stereotypes, along with real and artificial borders, began to unravel at century's end – only to be realigned, fought over, and re-imagined in the West a few years later during the new century's first World War. Values based upon patriarchy and natural law, which also informed a centuries-old empire, were challenged by an outcry that rode the moral high ground of abolition and suffrage in the United States and England. These early cultural agitators (who Brent Hayes Edwards calls “interventionists”) were unwaveringly committed to a single truth and not bound by national –or natural – law. They differed from their intellectual counterparts in the nineteenth century who were more likely to accept materialism, industrialization, patriarchy, and colonization as the costs of prosperity and progress. McKay writes of the promise of this modern-era insurgency, in the middle and last stanzas to “International Soul”:

The birds of Time will wing thee down the ways
Of continents. Thy progress will be keen
Against the impeding storms of misty days,
As ever progress through the years has been;
Even as strong-winged messengers are seen
In these amazing times with fine amaze,

Threading the tides of space that roll between
The earth and heaven, that ever holds man's gaze.

The nations will take arms against thy power,
The peoples warn against thy conquering spirit,
That conquers like the music of a flower;
Their ruling cliques endeavor to discredit
Thy influence and rail against thy merit,
Thy starry standards war upon to lower;
But the true prophets who thy spark inherit,
Will bear them yet upon life's grandest tower.²

Central to the newly emerging ideologies within international socialism was a commitment to pacifism, and proponents, such as Crystal Eastman in America, had questioned the sincerity in such jingoist terms as "preparedness," condemned by English editor C.K. Ogden as "word magic." In their rewriting of patriotic discourse, internationalists worked against the government machinery that reproduced slogans to "discredit / Thy influence and rail against thy merit, / Thy starry standards war upon to lower."³ They urged people, as Eastman did in 1916, to act *directly*, "not through their governments, or diplomats, or

² In revising the poem for *The Crisis* ("The Poet's Corner," June 1928), "Soul" was changed to "Spirit." In addition the last stanza was rewritten. *The Crisis* version ends:

*The nations will be stricken at thy word.
And grand old prejudices crumble down.
That ancient pride in warring breasts has stirred.
The noblest men shall work for any renown.
Thy truest heralds do not fear the frown
Of legioned bigots leagued by fear and spurred
To crush thy truth, but more the shouting clown,
The standard-flocking of the sheeplike herd.*

See "New Poems" in the James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³ Pacifism became a tangible movement in 1900. Emile Arnaud remarked that "we are not passive types, we are not peace makers; we are not just pacifiers; we are all those but something more; we are pacifists and our ideology is pacifism" (qtd by Léon de Montluc in *Les Etats-Unis d'Europe, supplément spécial*, Paris, 1922). In 1908, another French writer, Emile Faguet associated "peace ideas and practitioners as national enemies" (*Le Pacifisme*, qtd. in Cooper, p. 26).

armies" ~ hence, they espoused a *civil* form of direct action. ⁴ Their engagements were playful and sometimes parodic, but always focused and determined. They did not believe in the standoff or violence of the late nineteenth century, and used instead theater and guerrilla actions as part of their message. They were so persuasive that they convinced Mrs. Henry Ford to donate \$10,000 to their peace efforts. In 1916, Crystal Eastman and the English pacifist and poet Walter Fuller, who later helped McKay to establish his English literary credentials, put together the elaborate War Against War exhibit, which made the rounds in New York with a papier-mâché dinosaur (to symbolize the old order), antiwar cartoons, and posters. It was Eastman who raised the "Our Platform: Internationalism" banner at one of a number of Women's Peace Party demonstrations between 1916 and 1919, along with "No Navies" and "World Federation." Their theatrical skits anticipate the Living Theater and the more flamboyant antiglobalization network actions today. (While internationalism now evokes a more sinister meaning, of corporate capitalism and subsistence wages, those activists' intentions, across generations, remain the same.) ⁵

For McKay, this movement was more like "the music of a flower," and the kernel of its unarguable truths would give "new birth, /New strength, new purpose to man's boundless mind." Internationalists were traditional reformists, but many did, indeed, see themselves more as interventionists, particularly when conventional politics failed. They were – as Frederick Douglass once boasted – "agitators," who were set on "reforming"

⁴ Eastman was part of an "antipreparedness group." The year before she organized a massive telegram campaign urging President Wilson to "call for a conference of neutral nations with a view to establishing peace." Qtd. in John M. Craig, "The Women's Peace Party and Questions of Gender Separatism," in *Peace & Change* 19:4 (October 1994): 373-409.

society, from the language of war and imperialism to the way land, culture, and the primitive were perceived. They were not déclassé or dilettantes but pragmatists and visionary, and formed clubs, such as the Heterodox Club in New York, the Heretics in Cambridge, and the 1917 in London. They soberly “laid out a clear connection between arms-race costs and social disequilibrium,” and their analysis was “a crucial step in the formation of the modern consciousness of war and social justice” (Cooper 25). Crystal Eastman, for instance, was a feminist who “crossed over” to the international campaign and helped to inaugurate the ACLU and worker’s compensation laws. She contributed to the discourse that led to the formation of the League of Nations, and was influential in the direction it would soon take. Eastman’s political credentials have been clouded in large part because of her refusal to be an accomplice in military-industrial projects.

As difficult as it was to be a part of a radical movement of any type in the teens and twenties (with the creation of Interpol and the sedition laws in both England and America), internationalism was looked at as a fringe movement that was porous and indefinable, anathema to all Western ambitions of empire – esthetically and materially. One was a traitor by simply waving a “higher flag,” and lumped in scapegoated categories as “Jews, socialists and peace loving widows.” National leaders shrewdly “coopted” their peace efforts, which were tied to reform programs, by insisting that military buildup was

¹ John M. Craig, “The Women’s Peace Party and Questions of Gender Separatism,” in *Peace & Change* 19:4 (October 1994): 373-399.

necessary to deter invasion. ° As McKay wrote in a poem that appeared in his unpublished "Cycle" manuscript,

For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings,
From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things.

Internationalism's popularity coincided with the rise of feminist organizations such as the International Council of Women, the International Alliance of Women (originally the International Woman Suffrage Alliance), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the late 1880s. In the United States, Frederick Douglass was this network's most enthusiastic supporter, as a result of his frustrations with American racism and sexism. When first introduced in 1770, internationalism had less to do with an ideology of resistance and merely described inter-relations between modern nation states and (Keuhl 1).⁷ It became more of an ideology with the new century and the First World War. Under the broad banner of pacifism, it encompassed an "antinationalism" and "a cosmopolitan outlook" that viewed the ills of society – discrimination against women and colonials, for instance, and poverty – as the result of competing *nationalisms* (Rupp 1573;

⁶ Sandi Cooper, along with Blanche Cook, has called for an alternative "peace history," in which those "disappeared" public intellectuals, such as McKay and Eastman – who were, as Cooper says, "denounced by so-called realists as a phenomenon that falls on the continuum between utopianism and treason" – can be fully appreciated. "Few words are as misunderstood and even abused as internationalism and pacifism," Cooper notes. "Few political ideologies are as subject to conditioning by time, place, cultural and political settings. The history of these two isms usually persuades that one generation's realism is the next generation's world war." Cooper points out that "This capacity to label, to ridicule, and to trivialize that heads of state and their networks have articulated has burdened scholars" (24).

⁷ Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) advocated suffrage and the decriminalization of homosexuality, and opposed the belief in natural law as a way of solving social problems. He influenced twentieth-century internationalists such as C.K. Ogden, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Claude McKay. His efforts to make English education universal, regardless of political beliefs, race or creed, which led to the founding of University of London in 1826, inspired Ogden in his efforts at liberalizing Cambridge's admissions policy.

Kuehl 1). It built upon a tradition that included abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and socialism.

At different times, according to circumstances, internationalists advocated for "universal brotherhood, advanced the notion of an interdependent world, hoped to spread democracy, achieve disarmament, combat militarism, and abolish warfare. Some community-minded people had programs in the form of friendship societies, intellectual cooperation, education, humanitarian work, universal languages, religious ecumenism, and world citizenship" (Kuehl 4, 6). Like Fabian socialists, they viewed peace as "a process, something not enforced or imposed, and they favored rational approaches and systematic planning" – combining feminism, suffrage, vegetarianism, colonialism, horticulture, and advocating a return to the vernacular in a program for revolutionary change. Carrie Chapman Catt, U.S. Women's Suffrage Alliance president (and later a member of Eastman's Women's Peace Party) epitomized the optimism of internationalists when she urged other Alliance members in 1908 to be "so full of sisterly sympathy, of faith in womanhood, of exultant hope, a note so impelling, that it will be heard by the women of all lands, and will call them forth to join our world's army." For internationalists, *women* were the vanguard. With World War I collapsing many of their gains, Catt sent out another call at the 1915 Hague Congress, this time to "the Women of all Nations," to "raise our voices above the present hatred and bloodshed" and "declare ourselves united in the great ideals of civilization and progress" (Rupp 1576). The Women's Suffrage Alliance expanded its interests beyond suffrage, as did many of those groups. Eastman's Women's Peace Party in America, for instance, questioned whether separatism was an effective

strategy against war; likewise in England Sylvia Pankhurst's *Women's Dreadnought*, dropped "women" and added "workers" to the title, and its editor would then move on to become a notorious pan-Africanist.⁸ As a result, internationalists – particularly the women internationalists – were actively engaged in what one feminist scholar, Leila J. Rupp, called, "a constant renegotiation of collective identity" (1575, 1576, 1582). And by the end of the war, feminists had turned their attention to other issues, such as colonization.⁹

More than any other movement, internationalists provided colonials in the early years – whether in the colonies or in exile – a "nutritive" space, as Fabian socialist Sydney Olivier characterized it, to inaugurate a "skeptical search for the best revolutionary party or program, a quest that differentially engaged Lenin and Luxemburg, Pankhurst and Trotsky." They offered writers of the diaspora, such as Claude McKay, the tools that would enable them to make a thorough "critique of white radicalism, black nationalism, and High Modernism."¹⁰ Within this interstitial geography of "antinationalism" – a "dislocation" that critic Peter Hitchcock ascribes to a "cartography of resistance" – words are "torn between languages and identities" and "fractured through cartographies of displacement and disavowal," taking on new dimensions in their migrations, as in McKay's "Note of Harlem,"

⁸ Patricia W. Romero's *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical* (Yale U P, 1987), p. xi. See also Mary Davis' *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics* (foreword by Richard Pankhurst; Pluto Press, 1999).

⁹ By 1945, internationalists were more likely to agitate against international revolution, particularly if it was associated with state communism, which they perceived as "undemocratic and restrictive of genuine self-determination" (Kuehl 6). With the popularity of New Left politics, particularly in the 1960s, and its association with insurgent movements around the world, internationalists once again were seen as widowed utopians.

¹⁰ Lindberg, p. 17, 33.

The lines and colors are more manifold,
My senses quicken to appreciate
The new landmarks arisen midst the old,
The different signs and sounds that dominate.

Because of theoretical ties to William Morris and Henry George, the movement possessed “a psychic rootedness to the land,” which made this dislocation – and its diverse articulations – a part of its politics.¹¹ (This singular focus upon land was self-prophecy. With the onset of World War I, boundaries were erased, consumed, and devalued. So it was a triumphant rally for the opposition as nations and nation-builders became increasingly territorial, hell-bent and “determined to destroy,” as McKay observed, “the little that is left of them.”¹²) For internationalists, questions of identity, place, and one’s relationship to the earth were just as important as rubber, sugar, diamonds, gold, and sugarcane. To Olivier, Morris, George, Gertrude Jekyll, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb, an object’s usefulness was related to “community,” and value was accrued, as colonial governor and Fabian radical Sydney Olivier believed, “though the hand, the voice, the ear.”¹³ This conformed to Morris’ notion of land and “associative guilds,” which evolved into syndicalism in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Olivier’s re-valuation of

¹¹ Olivier put into practice theories of George and Morris while governor in Jamaica. For an understanding of “cartography of resistance,” see Hitchcock’s discussion in “Antillanité and the Art of Resistance,” *Research in African Literature* (27:2 (summer 1996), p. 33.

¹² Hitchcock, p. 37. McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Sandi Cooper comments on nations’ capacity to co-opt peace efforts. “On his good days,” she remarks, “the Kaiser concluded that pacifists were ‘Jews, socialists and peace loving windows’; and on his clever days, he defended his requests for more money for the military by insisting it was only for defense of the Fatherland – to deter invasion” (24).

¹³ Olivier, *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 76.

¹⁴ Fabian socialists, the descendants of Morris, Kathryne Lindberg writes in “Rebels to the Right/Revolution to the Left: Ezra Pound and Claude McKay in ‘The Syndicalist Year’ of 1912,” in *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism* (National Poetry Foundation, 2001), “were horrified by the revolutionary ends and violent means of Syndicalism,” and preferred instead “the legal and gradual socialism that grew out of the craft guilds.” p. 14-15.

land was a way to “normalize” a process of colonization out of control by the late nineteenth century. Such a re-valuation tugged at locale (the vernacular) and positioning (the perspective), which Stuart Hall has written on in his discussions of black diaspora and identity. This *positioning*, Hall emphasizes, is “never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions.”¹⁵ Similarly, these internationalists became engaged in formalizing a culture of migration – of interpreting those colonial routes while attempting to remedy the displacement caused by commerce and slavery. They were re-imagining empire, and made otherness a virtue. This otherness or difference, what some call *diaspora* (Stuart Hall, Brent Hayes Edwards, and cultural critics at the University of Birmingham, in England) has become central to scholarship with a transnational focus, for it epistemologically changes the assumption (Western, capitalist) that correlates knowledge production with national identity. As an analytical tool this “diasporic register,” as Edwards calls it, offers a critique of the values and institutions of nationalism, and their formations, that unify race in opposition to otherness.

Like internationalism, the concept of diaspora has been conditioned by “time and circumstances.” It, too, has been used as a collorary that has included “diverse ideologies” – more often as part of the African experience in the New World, or to support neo-colonialist and nationalistic projects. (Kuehl 1; Edwards 46). Historically, it has been a central part of the biblical “return” that involved Jews and injustice. But that uniqueness

¹⁵ Hall, “Introduction: Who needs ‘Identity’?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 1996), p. 4; qtd. in Lloyd Kramer, “James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual,” in *Historical*

has diminished. Thus, as Edwards notes, we have been conditioned, in certain disciplines, to view *diaspora* as a synecdoche for afrocentricism.¹⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, for instance, believed that the “idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent” belonged to the twentieth century, and insisted that “the color line” would filter all desires and needs.¹⁷ This left little room for writers, such as McKay, who saw themselves as “a new race, mentally mixed.”¹⁸ McKay’s “cartography of resistance” – a condition at the turn of the century in which *resistance* itself becomes a problematic term – begins with an internationalist configuration, where geography and difference become the cultural project itself. McKay syncretized several sensibilities and geographies – England/Jamaica, Romanticism and the vernacular, the ballad and sonnet forms. He subverted meanings by positioning the poem transnationally, which “forced” those traditions to “bend.” This “bent English” – not dialect, but a vernacular language of place – is what makes him unique. But it is the “passions” he expressed through his poetry that would be nurtured within feminist, horticultural, and early (Fabian) anti-colonial traditions. As an *enthusiastic* disciple, McKay rejected all racial and national barriers. But he knew the tradeoff as did Eastman and others.

Reflections/Reflexions Historiques 27:1, p. 33.

¹⁶ Edwards notes cautiously that *diaspora* was “open to ideological appropriation in a wide variety of political projects, from anti-colonial activism to what has long been called ‘Black Zionism’ – articulations of *diaspora* that collapse the term into versions of nationalism or racial essentialism,” in “The Uses of Diaspora” *Social Text* 19:1 (2001), p. 54.

¹⁷ DuBois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1946), -p. 7; qtd in Edwards, p. 46.

¹⁸ Alioune Diop, “Niam N’Goooura, or Présence Africaine’s raison d’être,” *Présence Africaine* 1 (October-November 1945), p. 1990-91. Qtd. in Edwards, p. 48.

STUART HALL SEES THIS DIASPORA AS ONE OF THE MANY ROUTES for “articulation” of art and culture. It mediates dominant societal ideologies by “joining up”(such as the parts of a body in an anatomical structure, as Brent Hayes Edwards explains), and “giving expression to” aspirations and desires. It does this in large part by citing, empowering, and registering.¹⁹ It “normalizes” difference within a shared frequency. The analogy to the body has particular resonance with McKay’s “Battle,” a poem in which the speaker sacrifices himself for cultural expression (a fantasy many radicals shared, a vision of himself as a Christ-like martyr).

Last night I dreamed that in the deadly strife,
Where privileged power rules with ruthless might,
I saw my body, a corpse still breathing life,
Trampled and mangled, a bloody, blackened sight.

Hall connects this to a theoretical space of resistance. Instead of a cartography, he borrows from the French in calling it *décalage*.

Décalage reestablishes unevenness and diversity, and provides an artistic opening, if you will, for someone like McKay. In these gaps, a diaspora can “step” and “move” around at various articulations against a unified culture. (One is reminded of Ralph Ellison’s prophetic announcement in *Invisible Man* of writing on different “frequencies.”)The germ of this cultural *resistance* (as Hitchcock would say) – or *renaissance*, depending, again, on your positioning – also has the ability to spiral outward to encompass a *dislocation* that overlaps with other diasporas. It is not “essence or purity,” but a “recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” that boundary this dislocation. Consequently, identity is

¹⁹ Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A*

shared difference. Unlike Frantz Fanon, who also chronicled a culture of resistance, there would be little of the “situational neurosis” of a colonial compelled to be continually on the run “away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence” (60). Instead, difference is interwoven into the cultural lattice of society. This was true for McKay, whose “discourses” with other intellectuals on oppression, color, condition, or class, took the form of *relationships* (particularly around power and gender), *transaction* (value exchange), and *position*. Difference, for McKay, was the essence of his identity and not conceived around one’s race or nationality. He identified and commingled with all classes and backgrounds in a counter-hegemonic unity – based on a particular “articulation.” As Edwards points out,

diaspora is introduced in large part to account for difference among African-derived populations, in a way that a term like Pan-Africanism could not. Moreover, diaspora points to difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally: in appropriating a term so closely associated with Jewish thought, we are forced to think not in terms of some closed or autonomous system of African dispersal but explicitly in terms of a complex past of forced migrations and racialization.²⁰

I argue that McKay’s creativity was sustained by a community of intellectuals who sought out (or accepted) *difference* as an ideology, which united them across borders, classes, and genders. He, indeed, had choices, (as he wrote in the poem “The Choice”) but problematized racial and gender identities to navigate ideological divides. (Both C.K. Ogden, the English polymath linguist, and he assumed certain *gendered* identities in relation to masculinity to expose societal stereotypes.) Some today would call this

Reader. Ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (U of Chicago P, 1996), p. 41

dishonest; others opportunistic. He nevertheless showed cunning at devising a trans-national identity. In Paul Gilroy's analysis of trans-Atlantic culture, McKay is described as a "sailor."²⁰ Without knowing it, Gilroy alludes to the changing notion of masculinity associated with the politics and gender freedom of sailors. But race for McKay was simply one other label that he sought to undermine. McKay resembled the much-admired "man without a country," praised by Max Eastman, in a 1916 essay, as "the only one who is able to think clearly and love truth no matter what occasions arise."²¹ With fellow internationalists McKay transversed a vast and interconnected network of the twentieth century that would soon, with the war's end, evaporate. His "motley mix" overlapped and intersected with other diasporas – Asian, Indian, Irish, and Anglo-French – as he pursued the limits of Empire.²²

Contemporary critics, however, have consigned McKay's literary place to the whim and dictates of white patrons, as Rhonda Cobham does in a recent essay – a condition in which he was compelled to constantly walk "the tightrope between exploiting and being exploited by the meanings assigned to him by his mentors." But I would argue that McKay's "mentoring" was different: It was sexual, social, cultural, political and, above all, *reciprocal*. Cobham sees McKay as the embodied "savage," who was "one step away from regressive sexuality, whose body linked the colonizers to (or separated them from) a state of nature they both desired and feared" – a description that may be partly true, except that

²⁰ Edwards, p.64. See Earl Lewis, "To Turn As on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), p. 765-876.

²¹ In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard U P, 1993).

²² Introduction, *Understanding Germany: The Only Way to End the War* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1916).

McKay was hardly the primitive, and his hedonism had little to do with then-current notions of blackness. McKay epitomizes the restless “youth who acquiesced to his mentor’s desire – a desire whose physical object could never be named – in exchange for the intellectual pleasures denied him by an unjust society” (Cobham 130-31). This tension is quite clearly expressed in “The Choice”:

O you would clothe me in silken frocks
And house me from the cold,
And bind with bright bands my glossy locks
And buy me chains of gold;

And give me – meekly to do my will –
The hapless sons of men: –
But the wild goat bounding on the barren hill
Droops in the grassy pen.

McKay never thought of himself as being patronized in the way Cobham describes, or even victimized (*a la* Fanon). I believed that he was sexually involved with all of his mentors so he could manipulate the “female” (or victim) position, a strategy often used by those oppressed by gender *and* class as well as race. His mentors, however, were *cultural* radicals, who also positioned *themselves* outside of mainstream conventional politics, whether the Dutch expatriate J.L.J.F.E Ezerman, C.K. Ogden, Crystal Eastman, or Walter Jekyll, Sydney Olivier and George Bernard Shaw.²³ Still, he was unable to escape without scars. The uniqueness of these deeply engaged relationships mustn’t be overlooked. It explains why he was impatient with the racial logic of DuBois, Locke, even Garvey. Why he

²³ See Earl Lewis, “To Turn As on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), p. 765-876.

²⁴ Jane Marcus, for instance, who has written on the relationship of Nancy Cunard and Claude McKay, notes that he was integral in providing Cunard with contacts throughout Europe, America, and the colonies, in

rejected statist politics – communist and capitalist. And why he eventually looked to the “tribal” – not in the sense of the primitive, but as a unifying concept of community much as Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes it: as an alternative, when conventional politics fail.

George Bernard Shaw summed up the internationalist dilemma for the colonial when he told McKay, “Poets remain poor, unless they have an empire to glorify and popularize them like Kipling.” ²⁵ Like many other writers who have traveled the route of the African Diaspora, McKay’s archive is scattered and in pieces. McKay’s travels combined financial necessity and pleasure. He was on the move while at work as a railroad waiter, and in Europe he traveled and wrote. He juggled expenses with freedom to write, which took him on a more rundown and seedy roadmap. On one occasion, at least, his few possessions were confiscated by the police, or stolen by buglers. Thus, those letters that are saved are invariably outgoing with few respondents (such as those at McMaster University), and the challenge is to read between the lines. Yet McKay’s situation is not unique, particularly with regard to literature of the Harlem. Much of the work is still uncovered, archived, or conveniently lost. There are large portions of McKay’s poems still unpublished (or never reprinted from journals) – deemed by editors of the day insignificant because they dealt with themes other than race. ²⁶ In addition, a large body of fiction was destroyed because it dealt with black homosexuality, at a time when there was a concerted effort by

helping her assemble *The Negro Anthology*. See *White Looks, Black Books: Nancy Cunard and Modernist Primitivism*.

²⁵ McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (Harcourt Brace, 1970), p. 61, 64.

²⁶ Numerous collections have been proposed over the years. The historian Winston James is preparing McKay’s complete works, which includes his prose, verse, and essays. William Maxwell is editing a collection of poetry for the University of Illinois Press.

black intellectuals and publishers to mainstream and normalize Negro thought, particularly in America.

BUT MY INTERESTS EXTEND BEYOND HARLEM. I LOOK TO INTERNATIONALISM and a peculiar dynamic that was taking shape in the early twentieth century between Diaspora, Empire, and Claude McKay. I position the esthetics and cultural politics of Sydney Olivier, and Walter and Gertrude Jekyll, who were considered proponents of a type of Empire, against the diasporic esthetics of McKay. One major route of transaction for these English intellectuals and the author was horticulture, which came of age in the new century along with modern warfare and colonization. The commerce in flora was motivated by a passionate desire to nurture and “repair” the exotic; to mend and strengthen by grafting and hybridity. “In the hands of the hybridist,” Gertrude Jekyll remarked, “distinct and beautiful flowers and improved forms of fruits and vegetables are moulded, and our gardens made to yield a more beautiful produce.”²⁷ For these horticulturists, Jamaica was an unblemished Eden whose inhabitants were hardy varieties of “the real thing.” (Olivier created just such an idyllic image in *My Blessed Jamaica*.) On one hand, Claude McKay was seen as an example of a sturdier, more durable species, while, on the other, he was a skillful translator of the folk *botanica*.

The second part of my analysis looks at the evolution of internationalism, and those public intellectuals who influenced McKay’s radicalism. I view, for instance, Fred-

²⁷ *The Garden*, January 13, 1900, p. 1.

erick Douglass, an early nineteenth-century proponent of internationalism, in the same “moment” as later insurgents, such as Max and Crystal Eastman, Sylvia Pankhurst, and C.K. Ogden – all of whom, as Edward W. Said has written elsewhere, spoke “the truth to power” – a Quaker (pacifist) form of protest that aptly describes these intellectuals. Beginning with Douglass in America and Olivier in Jamaica and England, these radicals offered a general resistance to the dominant ideology of empire, and an early critique “of how identity, tradition and the nation are constructed entities, most often in the insidious form of binary oppositions that are inevitably expressed as hostile attitudes to the Other.”²⁸ They were excavators of Cooper’s “peace history.” But they viewed their task as one that did not occupy a *space* in history (in terms of national pedigree), but rather *made* space for other histories, which they saw as emerging with the collapse of borders and contested territories.²⁹ In that sense, McKay carved the *literary* dimensions of an emerging black culture of expatriation that provided black public intellectuals with a shared meeting place. (Later Francophone writers and editors of the 1920s and 30s, such as the Nardals and Aimé Césaire, would be enthusiasts in claiming McKay as a *negritude* writer who wrote of this culture of expatriation, particularly in his novel *Banjo*, which was first published, and is now in print again, in France.)

McKay and others saw the twentieth century not in terms of color or continent, as DuBois did, but of exile, and echoed Frederick Douglass’s hopes for a rich vernacular of

²⁸ Edward Said, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” *The Nation* (September 17-24, 2001), p. 32.

²⁹ Hitchcock, p. 34.

the modern age.³⁰ My reach in some of the chapters that follow is not confined to a singular condition of coloniality or blackness, but includes “the garden set” of the Royal Horticultural Society’s Gardens at Chiswick, England, and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Hope, in Jamaica; the late nineteenth-century “internationalism” of Frederick Douglass; the “pan-Africanism” of Sylvia Pankhurst; the “straight English” of C.K. Ogden; the “variant” Creole of the expatriate Walter Jekyll, as they impact on McKay. His “geography” speaks to a restless search for his artistic soul, which ultimately took him to London to publish as an English poet.

McKay’s significance was first noticed by fellow Caribbean writers in the early twentieth century. Eric Waldron, for instance, described him as “a man hipped on the universalization of the Negroes.”³¹ His characters, Waldron explained, were like “a sargasso upon a Caribbean reef.” But with the rise of the New Negro, McKay was perceived by Americans as living “in the shadows of his European exile”; as someone who “had disappeared mysteriously to the Soviet Union and had retired exhausted to the sidewalk cafes of Montmartre.”³² Even while in France, he preferred the class - and “motley mix” - of Marseilles. The international zone of Tangiers, in North Africa, accommodated his urge to move in and out of “nationalities,” as he crisscrossed Casablanca, Fez Medina, and

³⁰ “In two hundred and fifty years there has grown up a million of intermediate,” the abolitionist observed. “And this will continue.” Frederick Douglass, “The Future of the Negro,” *North American Review*, July 1884.

³¹ The above reference is from a review of McKay’s *Banjo* in August 17, 1929. It is ironic that Waldron, writing in the Jamaican *Daily Gleaner*, would also criticize the poet for “sundering all ties with America.” In discussing *Home to Harlem*, he noted that the poet’s stay in the United States “was too brief to enable him to absorb with any degree of purity the languages of the lower classes of America negroes.” Did Waldron feel that McKay’s “universalization of the Negroes” was actually a hindrance to his understanding the purity of American Negro dialect? (Waldron, “The Negro Renaissance,” August 17, 1929.)

³² McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (Harcourt Brace, 1970), p. 227.

Rabbat. In Berlin, he described in verse a German temperament that would give rise to fascism, and later celebrated the spirit of revolt in Barcelona and Madrid that would lead to the Spanish Civil War. More accurately, McKay saw himself as a “free agent” who represented and defended vagabonds and the disinherited. The sailor poet traveled among marginal intellectuals who, like himself, viewed nationality as a passport to illegitimacy. He read and wrote in French and Spanish, and studied Islam and Jewish cultures while in North Africa. By 1932, however, with the world, again, slipping toward hegemony and war, McKay quixotically rode a “universal wind,” in which the “old foundations” would be shaken “from sill to rafter.”³³ McKay defiantly held his *crimson* banner aloft. He was, in fact and deed, a revolutionary poet in the grand traditions of Whitman, Douglass, Shelley, and Shakespeare, and echoed the American bard’s salutatory vision: “About art I am romantic. I salute it everywhere.”³⁴ McKay was a *diasporic* writer – in contrast to merely a writer of the Diaspora, and sought beauty in chaos *and* hybridity. He mined those corners – and closets – of culture, what he called “taboos,” that were “as rare flowers among weeds.”³⁵ In “A Song of Birth,” he describes a moment when all forms – national, political, high and low – “are blurred and melted into mist.”

Out of the vibrant body comes a song,
Uncovered like a jewel from the earth,
Out of uncharted realm of shadows and light,
Is flashed the tidings of another birth.

³³ From “Travail,” *Workers’ Dreadnought*, January 10, 1920.

³⁴ Claude McKay to Nancy Cunard, September 29, 1932. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

³⁵ McKay to Ogden, 1922, William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

The watchers' eyes are scintillant like stars,
God's gifts are shining in the dismal night,
Where forms are blurred and melted in the mist
And sounds have precious qualities of light.

The physical and psychic strike accord
And touch the hidden core of secret things,
Where muted harmonies invite the soul
And the spirit speeds the senses flight on wings.

Under this obscure layer of deeper urge
Are gestant even greater than they seem
Inventive particles of the intellect
That shape the purpose of the eternal dream.

"BLACKNESS," AS HOUSTON BAKER JR. HAS RECENTLY ARGUED, can no longer be a given, and the texts associated with that condition can no longer be read as "merely black." Against the project of this "unsettling blackness," he suggests, lines of modernism, progressivism, avant-gardism, montage, hybridity, anxiety of influence and continental theory dissolve, and re-emerge in a cultural mix that allows recuperation of a Harlem author into an international public intellectual.³⁶ Within this demography, as Homi Bhabha has noted, can be found

the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing.³⁷

³⁶ Baker, Houston A. "Preface: Unsettling Blackness." *American Literature* 72:2 (2000), p. 247.

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, "Life at the Border: Hybrid Identities of the Present." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 14:1 (Winter 1997), p. 30.

I

The Ways of Empire

2

Sydney Olivier and "The White Man's Burden at Home"

I must say, my imagination will stretch no further than to
suggest rebellion in general as remedy

~ William Morris.¹

IT IS WITHIN THE FABIAN TRADITION, which balanced feminism and colonial self-determination, where the poet Claude McKay's poetic training begins. "Personally, I do not care from what class the English Lenin comes," the poet admitted, with little of the class-conscious prejudices of the era. "I own allegiance to no master." McKay was very conscious of the "new criticisms" and trends in poetry, to which he was "keenly responsive and receptive." But he revealed:

I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods. I have not used patterns, images, and words that would stamp me a classicist nor a modernist. My intellect is not scientific enough to range me on the side of either; nor is my knowledge wide enough for me to specialize in any school.

¹ 1881, in an address to the Burslem Potters. Quoted in Sydney Olivier, *Letters and Selected Writings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948).

I have never studied poetics; but the forms I have used I am convinced are the ones I can work in with the highest degree of spontaneity and freedom.²

In addition to McKay's lawlessness, however, was a deep and unwavering commitment to land, which was nurtured in his early apprenticeships with the horticulturist Walter Jekyll and the Fabian socialist Sydney Olivier, the governor of Jamaica from 1907 to 1913, who carried the ideology of Henry George, and the centrality of land to societal value, to the islands:

Though you mav cas' me from your breas'
An trample me to deat',
My heart will trus' you none the less,
My land I won't feget.³

Jamaica and its culture inspired Sydney Olivier to look at the importance of free, untaxed land. Margaret Olivier writes in her memoir:

When later in Jamaica he began to concentrate on West Indian problems it was natural enough that agricultural questions should come first, that the soil, the whole land, should be considered in relation to these. But in every country he visited it was the same, the soil and the configuration of the earth were his first interest.⁴

² "Book Reviewed" [Hugh Hope], *The Workers' Dreadnought* (July 24, 1920); "Author's Word," *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (Harcourt Brace, 1922). McKay's esthetics became formalized after 1920 and an intense one-year apprenticeship with C.K. Ogden in England.

³ "My Native Land, My Home," in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912), p. 86. Even though Olivier argued with George's narrow approach, he still nevertheless believed in overhauling the colonial system, with land reform as central to that project.

⁴ *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 60.

"Hard Times." McKay's first attempt at dialect as a 19-year-old wheelwright, explored those Georgist issues of land taxation, within a vernacular frame. Written in 1909, the poem speaks to Olivier's desire for land reform.⁵

De mo' me wuk, do mo' time hard,
I don't know what fe do;
I ben' me knee an' preav to Gahd,
Yet t'ings same as befo'

De Taxes knockin' at me door,
I hear de bailiff's v'ice;
Me wife is sick, can't get no cure,
But gnawin' me like mice.

De picknies hab to go to school
Widout a bit fe taste;
And I am working like a mule,
While buccra sittin' in de cool,
Hab 'nuff nenvam fe waste.

De clodes is tearin' off dem back
When money seems noa mek;
A man can't eben ketch a mac,
Care how him 'train him neck.

De pease won'r pop, de corn can't grow,
Poor people face look sad;
Dat Gahd would cuss de lan' I'd know,
For black navgur too bad.

I won't gib up, I won't say die,
For all de time is hard;
Aldough de wul' soon en', I'll try
Mv wutless best as time goes by,
An' trust on in me Gahd.

⁵ Although "Hard Times" is considered the first poem published by McKay, he wrote to Ogden that he began writing in "the Jamaican dialect" in 1905, two years before his training with Walter Jekyll. McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready.

The poem is a personal “report” to radicals and reformers, such as would appeal to the literary governor, who saw fiction and poetry as “nutritive,” and who admired and “knew by heart immense masses of poetry and pages of Dickens.” ° “Hard Times,” then, had particular resonance with the governor; Jamaica was viewed as a tabula rasa, in which English classes and attitudes, which would, under English conditions, resist change become, in this colonial dynamic, interactive. The Dickensian sense of justice, in which the underdog triumphants, as in “Hard Times,” had appeal to Olivier. Away from English traditions, the governor would rekindle his poetic imagination, vicariously through McKay. “I never became a poet,” Olivier admitted ruefully, “sufficiently urgently to believe in my poems to the point of publicity, except as a satirical versifier. It was not in that generation recognised as natural, or even creditable, for everyone to write poetry.” But Olivier could be encouraging. Together, both Olivier and Walter Jekyll, the Jamaican folklorist and horticulturist, from different English positions of Empire, relived their rebellious “desires” through McKay. Olivier enjoyed himself, he admitted, when he

wandered about the country alone, or in company with some reputed madman of similar tastes, with whom I could not only share the intoxicating excitement of living and growing things in the fields and woods among which I seemed nearest to reality when alone, and out of contact with which came joy and inspiration of fancy – but could also talk about love affairs and acknowledge the composition of poetry.⁷

McKay, also, admitted to having “a mania for wandering,” and found some of his most inspirational moments while “strolling late at night in the central business district under

° There is some inkling of tension between McKay and Olivier that has less to do with poetics than politics. In a letter to C.K. Ogden, McKay appreciatively called Oliver Jamaica’s “literary governor,” whose endorsement helped to sell books. McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready.

⁷ “Not Much: “A Fragment of Autobiography,” *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 25.

the great buildings when they are empty of life and traffic is stilled.” Jekyll, too, was an inveterate walker, preferring the mountainous trails through the bush to the well-worn roadways.⁸ Together, colonial and colonizer, were keen reporters of their natural environment. In one such observation in 1891, traveling through Belize, Olivier wrote:

Riding from Caledonia we had a rougher road, as there were no more habitations and we were riding through high bush, full of splendid palms, but not many other fine timber trees, most of the valuable wood having been cut out long ago. The track we rode on was a good deal grown up with growing bush that had been cut out for a year, and the bushes were consequently six and seven feet high; that being a moderate rate of growth here. In other places the track was filled with *Coleus* plants, that variegated-bright foliage. One sees some splendid ones in gardens here, dark maroon leaves with gold borders. The wild ones in this bush are rather blotchy and ugly.⁹

As early as 1891, Olivier had a sensitivity to the deforestation that was then going on (and still is, though under different regimes of home rule) in the colonies. The literary governor’s interests in horticulture would become a colonial pastime.. But Olivier also needed to juggle the plantation realities of the Island - the conglomeration of United Fruit Company, for instance, and newer agribusiness interests of American companies - alongside native concerns and desires. The buccra “sittin in the cool” in the poem “Hard Times” alludes to those tensions. The poem refers to those living, of course, in the shade of the plantation, but also, obliquely, to those sitting in the shady temperate zones of the United States, Europe, and England. Olivier’s politics were put to the test when he became governor. Although his official title (as representative of the Colonial Office) was softened considerably by his literary and socialist interests, he nevertheless had to negotiate the

⁸ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready; McKay, “Up To Date,” p. 2. Harv Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

⁹ Sydney Olivier to Margaret Olivier, February 6, 1891. *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 88.

needs of planters and business people – whose “color prejudice,” noted George Bernard Shaw, “demanded satisfaction in a colony in which blood was so mixed that no matter how white your host might be, you never could be sure that his father was not as brown as a berry” – against persistent demands for autonomy from a black and mulatto peasantry, who clearly were disenfranchised.

Although he always held steadily by the Colonial Office as the only power that stood between the black proletariat and their pitiless exploitation by the West Indian Planters and the diamondocracy in Africa, he had no Kiplingesque idolatry of the Empire, and said, quite openly, that its break-up would not be the end of the world. . . . His Fabian grasp of the appalling social danger of the imperial instincts that were keeping Downing Street under the thumb of a handful of planters in the face of millions of black proletarians, reduced official Kiplingism, in his view, to negligible poppycock.¹⁰

“Hard Times” laments excessive taxes and lack of medicine. Schools are useless, if you must attend them malnourished, the poet seems to imply. The land, which has failed the peasants, is in deep psychic pain. What, then, has brought about the depletion of the land? Lack of commitment, hope, investment? One wonders if McKay simply is pointing to the ominous threat of clear-cutting tropical lands for the large plantations. In any case, Olivier would have identified with the fears of those whose “Gahd would cuss de lan’ I know.” The poem speaks to a progressive and “literary” governor, and is not an angry diatribe; it conveys clear messages to this reluctant representative of the Colonial Office, who was himself sympathetic to the peasant. “I found lack of contact with the realities and the people with whose affairs I was dealing becoming rather flat,” Oliver wrote of his decision to be in the colonies, “and with increasing perception that most Governors were

¹⁰ Sydney Olivier: *Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 14.

exceedingly stupid" (Olivier 36). The antithesis to the soil was the metropolis, which Olivier distrusted. (A distrust McKay would cultivate as well.) "Towns do not produce races," he wrote in *White Capital and Coloured Labour*, "they destroy them" (14). McKay's poetic and racial nature would struggle to understand this perverse modernity and an insurgent cosmopolitanism. (His later poems work out this dichotomy, in which America's "hot-brute hatred" is juxtaposed against England "sepulchral-cold hostility.") He considered England, nevertheless, both the soul of Empire and the "Motherland" – an idealization of childhood memories. These two concerns would form the ends of McKay's diasporic sensibility.¹¹

Sydney Olivier's *White Capital and Coloured Labor*, *The Anatomy of African Misery*, and *Jamaica: The Blessed Island* made a tremendous impact on colonized and colonizers alike, such as McKay's brother, Uriah Theodore, and other progressive Jamaicans, who also viewed the island as a socialist experiment in land reform. Olivier was nevertheless privileged, and acted, in many respects, like a benevolent despot, even while he attempted to carve space for an early attempt at decolonization. Although he was praised by civic leaders and in newspaper editorials, Olivier's term as governor was tarnished by accusations of too much radical reform on one hand and mismanagement on the other. At times he

¹¹ The poet's uneasiness with formal communism, much like his coolness to modernism or other schools of ideology, I believe, had less to do with a conservative contrariness than with an impatience with mainstream politics on the left and right, which never dealt with feminist, colonial, and pacifist demands. His contrariness was one of continual disappointment with people and their inability to maintain a committed radicalness. In his voluminous letters to C.K. Ogden, Nancy Cunard, and Max Eastman, this is painfully apparent. While these intellectuals viewed him as a cause in itself – the Negro as vanguard of a world revolution, or to satisfy their own white guilt – the poet was pushed further to the margins where he rejected much of Western conventions.

did behave tyrannically, but only as an editor. For instance, McKay wanted to include the poem "De Gubnor's Salary" in his first book of poems, *Songs of Jamaica*, in 1912, while Walter Jekyll sought out the governor's imprimatur; in exchange McKay would write a dedication. Unfortunately the book's publication coincided with Olivier's departure as governor of Jamaica. When Olivier heard that a poem dealt specifically with him, in a unflattering way, he became enraged. Everyone from peasants to Church officials praised his term as governor, which was soon to end. But McKay was of a different opinion. "We thought that for a small and poor island like Jamaica, a governor could do quite well on about 1,000 and traveling expenses, instead of 5,000, if the lavish entertainment were cut out." The offending poem was removed to receive the governor's blessing. But the poem was soon used by the opposition to discredit Olivier. It was published in the *Daily Gleaner* a few days before Olivier's departure in January 1913, "with a footnote explaining why it was held back." Recalled McKay: "I was in America by then, but I heard that the local sheets knifed him for it and, as he was unduly sensitive to criticism, I suppose he was quite put out."¹² Rhona Cobham points out that Jekyll censored much of the political poems from McKay's work. Yet this is the only mention of censorship, and it is interesting that the censorship involved Olivier's vanity, and not politics. McKay wrote of the governor, in the dedication, that his "sympathy with the black race had won . . . the admiration of all Jamaicans," an appellation, he said, was forced upon him to include, in order that the book be sanctioned by the literary governor. Yet Olivier did meet McKay on several

¹² McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready.

occasions, usually with Jeykll, and was interested enough to read a selection of McKay's verse. "I appreciate the talent they exhibit," he noted tersely.

To others, however, Olivier was putting into practice a radicalism that worked with the tools of Empire in making change. His reputation as a "reformer" followed him, and it was feared that he would foment extraordinary changes in Jamaica. The sudden appointment to the Board of Agriculture in England was an attempt to prevent his ideas on land reform in Jamaica from becoming a reality. Even as he assumed his new position with the Board of Agriculture in England, there was an outcry among conservatives that he would "embark on some mysterious and, possibly, Socialistic land campaign, with which, it is felt, the Board of Agriculture may be connected" (*Gleaner*, January 25, 1913). George Bernard Shaw, Olivier's long-time political ally, noted that

He and Sidney Webb, Comtist at Second-hand through John Stuart Mill, shared the duty of resident clerk at the Colonial Office. Both of them had passed into the upper division of the Civil service, Olivier heading the competition list, apparently so easily that I never heard either of them speak of it, through to me it was a wonder, at the passing of even an elementary school examination has always been for me an impossible feat. There was no question then of peerages to come for either of them: by plunging into Socialism they were held to be burning their boats as far as any sort of official promotion was concerned, though as founders of Fabian Socialism they soon took The Cause off the barricades, and made it constitutional and respectable. (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings* 9)

Margaret Olivier confirmed Shaw's assessment by noting that Olivier remained a socialist throughout his life, "convinced that the root of the economic evils in our society was the capitalist system" (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writing* 77).

Exasperated by the ineptness of a bungled empire at the home office, Olivier set out for the colonies in 1890 to connect, as he said, "with the realities and the people." His first stop as an official representative of the Colonial Office was British Honduras, then

Belize, a tour of the West Indies, and finally an appointment as colonial secretary in 1899 in Jamaica. Olivier became governor in 1907, taking office in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake and fire that left the city of Kingston leveled. His mission, then, was to rebuild Jamaica – in more ways than the colonial bureaucracy anticipated. He was governor until January 1913, when he returned to England with a hasty appointment that was the result of apprehensions in the Colonial Office.

Poetry was central to Olivier, and he called it “nutritive,” feeding his rebelliousness and passion for wanderlust. He saw himself as an artist, and had written verse (*Poems and Parodies*), while at Oxford, as well as a novel (*Empire-builder*, published by fellow Fabian Leonard Woolf, off Hogarth Press, in 1927), which William James praised. (The American philosopher, and brother to Henry James, also saw Olivier’s work in the colonies as tremendously important.)¹³ To be expected, As governor, Olivier encouraged the writing of verse, and was enthusiastic about exporting the colonial sensibility to England. He sponsored poetry prizes, encouraged elocution contests (in which McKay participated at an early age), offered trade scholarships to promising colonials (one of which was given to McKay for his studies), and personally made a point of reading Kay’s poems in manuscript.¹⁴ Both Walter Jekyll and he were instrumental in propagating the idyllic image of Jamaica as a peasant paradise – very much in the vernacular tradition that William Morris would

¹³ James to Olivier, October 23, 1905. Olivier wrote on “the negro question” for the *International Quarterly* the year before. The article may have been “The White Man’s Burden at Home,” which appeared in the April 1905 issue. *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 126.

¹⁴ According to a report in *The Daily Gleaner*, McKay had won a Trade Scholarship in 1906, and “learned the trade of wheelwright: but on account of illness the indenture was cancelled; he joined the Kingston police force on June 7, 1911, and was stationed in T Halfway Tree, until the spring of 1912.

have celebrated.¹⁵ Echoing Ruskin and Morris, Olivier believed that art should be “the expression of nature through the temperament of the producer.” He saw, as did Jekyll, the Jamaican hillsides a cauldron of creativity. “Style is conveyed through the hand,” Olivier explained. “There must be authentic, original vital activity of the worker in producing his work, or it can have no beauty.”¹⁶ No doubt, he viewed McKay’s dialect verse, *Songs of Jamaica*, as having the same mission as his *Jamaica: The Blessed Island*, as a spirited travel advertisement for a robust land of beauty and authenticity.

Thus, McKay’s early understanding of Empire would be shaped by liberal and iconoclastic representations of British colonization, such as was embodied by Olivier and Walter Jekyll, who arrived shortly before the Fabian administrator, to research “Annancy Stories” for the Folk-Lore Society in London.¹⁷ Along with Gertrude Jekyll, Walter’s sister in England, these self-styled radicals left an indelible impression upon McKay’s artistry and conception of race, which can be seen in his dialect verse, particularly *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Poems*, both published in 1912. Those works reflect early imperial/colonial obsessions with class, exoticism, botany, exoticism, and sexuality. Olivier and Jekyll may have also been the inspiration for some of McKay’s poems and a setting for a novel. For instance, Olivier lived in the Port Royal Mountains at a Great House called Flamstead (“Great House” being the term used in Jamaica to denote a house occupied by a planter, or

¹⁵ Morris was a founder of British socialism, which emphasized councils and associations, and the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement drew much of its inspiration from his work. Associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (as was Ruskin), Morris founded Kelmscott Press in 1890, which influenced book design and printing. He placed great importance on pre-industrial crafts.

¹⁶ Olivier, “William Morris,” *Spectator* (March 23, 1934); qtd. in *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 74, 76.

a representative of the colonizer class), which was used as a setting by McKay in the opening scene of his novel *Banana Bottom*. Jekyll, at one point the interlocutor between Olivier and McKay, was described by Olivier (in a letter to Margaret Olivier, September 19, 1900) as living in Yallahs Valley, outside Kingston. "He has retired here," Olivier noted and "is a vegetarian, etc. He apparently does nothing but work in the garden. I wanted to see whether he was in the 'Yogi' line: but I am not sure he is anything more than a loafer."¹⁸

To reach Flamstead, one used a bridle path, which was very steep and winding, upon which only the hearty visit, sure of foot, like Jekyll, would venture. Jekyll of course found the visits refreshing, and look forward to the climb "up from his valley." Jekyll always arrived "on foot, in sandals and clad in a white suit and we fed him on red pea soup and avocado pears." But Olivier "was much attached to him . . . we seldom saw him in the plains; he was somewhat of a recluse and kept to his hill home."¹⁹ Eccentricities in diet or dress were nothing unusual for the seemingly straight-laced administrator, who remembered fondly sharing "vegetarian breakfasts" of "luscious cocoa and Hill's wholemeal bread and butter" with Shaw. "The food was delicious," Olivier remarked.

I also enjoyed the delight of meeting his admirable and astonishing mother and hearing her comments on Shaw's (and my own) associates and political interests, for at that time we were both engaged, in concert with Sidney Webb, one of my fellow junior clerks in the office, and organising the foundations of the Socialist Revolution, frequenting anarchist communist clubs in Clerkenwell (where I heard Frank Harris deliver a most impassioned incitement to arson and bombing), while

¹⁷ *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Songs, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* (Folk-Lore Society, England, 1907).

¹⁸ *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

at the same time we were engaged in Land Reform propaganda, inspired by Henry George and producing in association with the Reverend Stewart Headlam, a monthly journal entitled *The Christian socialist*, the humour of which was that none of us was at the time either Christian or socialist.²⁰

Olivier and Jekyll were more than adjoining neighbors, but shared an interest in mentoring McKay. At least one meeting occurred between McKay and Olivier, which took place at Jekyll's mountaintop estate. The meeting, according to McKay's recollection years later, was tinged with homoerotic rivalry between the Fabian free-thinking governor and the ascetic free-thinking ethnologist, with Olivier asking to spend the night (the walk up to Flamstead was probably dangerous), and Jekyll politely refusing. "When Olivier pointed out that Claude was staying, Jekyll told him there was a difference; Claude was his 'special friend,'" remarked McKay.²¹ Thus the politics that McKay acquired were of an upper and middle class English distrust of modernity – tinged with upper-class coded homoeroticism. McKay revealed this bias in a glib comment to Ogden.

in the days of King Rum and Sugar when major dukes and lords were sent out to govern it was a different matter from now when we only got second-rate civil servants and military misfits" (McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920).

Might this have been a reference to Olivier, whose handling of colonial affairs might have been a little too idealistic for McKay? Such an attitude might help us understand McKay's "skeptical search," as Kathryne Lindberg characterizes McKay's early education and encounters with seemingly contradictory positions: a civil servant who espoused revolution and an upper-class expatriate who revolted against his class interests."

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

As a result, Lindberg notes, McKay mediated and masked his desires, performing “simultaneous translations” between thinking peasants and what the poet called “uniformed white radicals” (40). She perceptively locates McKay’s esthetics, along with Ezra Pound and other High Modernists (but also, I might add, Fabians, internationalists, and pacifists) “at the center of Empire” (12). And she goes on to write:

McKay’s work, almost or even until the end when he turned decidedly anti-Communist on the ground of the Party’s opportunism, recurs to this conflict between the claims of class and race or nation, oppositions that he recognized as manipulated from above by states and parties. But nation, given that his “nation,” Jamaica, is always mixed or creolized and at the same time riven by caste, is under special scrutiny in his early poems. (41)

Jamaica, whether “mixed or creolized” or “riven by caste” was still a part of the discourse on the direction of Empire (argued in *Fabianism and the Empire*, and the governor’s own “The White Man’s Burden at Home” and *The League of Nations and the Primitive Peoples*) was shared colonized and colonizer. One such poem, which appeared in England in April 1912, as a forecast of his forthcoming *Songs of Jamaica*, was “George William Gordon to the Oppressed Natives” – which has the effect of being a loaded message, sent by the disgruntled governor, to the complacent proponents of Empire. Olivier, himself, Lindberg notes, was “direct successor to the abolitionist discourse” that inspired the revolt of the working Englishmen – and included colonial and women throughout the Commonwealth. Either Jekyll or Olivier had a hand in placing the message, which warned abolitionists that their work, within the colonies and England, was far from complete:

²¹ Wayne Cooper *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 29.

Keep before you Clarkson's name!
Ei your groans win de fight,
Jes' to put do'n dis great shame
Lawful 'tis to use our might.

The notorious English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson died the year that the Morant Bay Rebellion was brutally suppressed, in 1846, and this allusion by McKay speaks directly to sympathetic abolitionist, and their successors, suffragettes in England, such the Quaker Jacob Bright, who with Richard Marsden Pankhurst formed the Men's League for Woman's Suffrage. By invoking the English Clarkson along with the colonial George William Gordon, a mulatto, who was executed soon after for participating in the rebellion, McKay transcends national concerns (echoing the international militancy of Douglass). The poem, in the form of a message, appeared "at the same time that the Boer was expressing something of the spirit of the South African Union," a preface to the poem explains, and that the poem might convey to readers the "desire of the negro for a greater freedom." Coincidentally, Olivier, Shaw and others (most notably in *Fabianism and the Empire*) issued a number of manifestoes concerning South Africa and land rights. George William Gordon, who rallied to the cause of the Jamaican peasantry symbolizes a peculiar condition of revolt and accommodation, against and within traditions, and which concerned discourse between colonial and colonizer. Walter Jekyll, a lapsed minister, in many ways resembles Gordon and his identification with the peasantry. "Gordon's heart bleeds for you," McKay writes, in evoking this abolitionist legacy, emphasizes the *you*.

He will lead to victory:
We will conquer every foe,
Or togeder gladly die

The poem is consequently complex and textured and not simply a radical text. It moves through and on frequencies of discourse that involved internationalism and Fabianism as well as the traditions of abolition and empire. Comments Lindberg:

The poem – and its Gordon – has an international. Multi-racial, and even cross-class appeal that is addressed to three audiences: first, to white liberals in the abolitionist tradition, second, to the white and mulatto bourgeoisie of Jamaica, and, lastly, to the oppressed black migrant workers.²²

Another key influence, again through Olivier, was George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, feminist, and Fabian socialist, who maintained lifelong political and personal ties with the Jamaican governor (both considered themselves outcasts and renegades). McKay also thought of himself as an outcast and became enamoured of Shaw for his feminist-pacifist politics, his creative energy, and his natural lifestyle. (One must wonder if McKay admired the playwright's devoted vegetarianism in his apt description of Shaw "as an evergreen tree grown indoors.")²³ The two finally met in England in 1920, when the poet arrived armed with a manuscript and a letter of introduction from Frank Harris. Shaw immediately came to mind for an introduction to McKay's manuscript, *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* to C.K. Ogden, his editor. But nothing came of it. (McKay to Ogden, 1920). When they met in 1920, Shaw pointed out that colonials were unlikely candidates for poets, when they met in 1920, and suggested a career as pugilist (a response,

²² The poem was published in *T.P.'s Weekly* and, subsequently, in the May 3, 1912 *Daily Gleaner*, the Jamaican daily newspaper. "Gordon," writes Lindberg, "represents both the recourse to direct action and the promise of a wide or mass united front that would work legally within the system," such as the radical wing of the Toown Party which was opposed to the colonial philosophy of the Planter's Party. The Morant Bay Rebellion, which culminated in Gordon's execution on October 20, 1865, was feared by the planter's because he was "an educated mulatto with designs on self-rule and full de-colonization – of mind and nation." Known as "The Governor Eyre Controversy," the revolt was premature; 60 years later a new governor, the socialist Olivier, would seek just such a solution to the limits of empire (58-62).

some critics have argued, that illustrated Shaw's insensitivity to colonial plight). Yet he also expressed misgivings about the career choice of his friend Olivier, who he felt was unfit to be a colonial governor - or any type of administrator for British empire-building. He did find one aspect of Olivier's temperament crucial for work in the Colonial Office. It was Olivier's Huguenot mix, the playwright observed, that "gave him the invaluable power of taking an objective view of his employer, the British Empire, now reluctantly re-christened the British Commonwealth. It helped him to get on well with me; for I being Irish, am more a foreigner in England than any man born in Wiltshire could possibly be." ²³ Olivier made note of this peculiar complexion (his mixed ancestry), intimating that this qualified him for his duties as a go-between empire and the colonies. "I have a rather fatal facility of seeing several sides to many questions at the same time," he wrote Margaret Olivier, on February 7, 1884.

That is the result, I suppose, of my being such a mixture of French, Irish, and Puritan-Saxon blood. I have two or three brains, and one is always criticizing the other. I shall never be a single-minded bigot. (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings* 63)

Such an outsider position had appeal to the young poet. Here, he found, were critics of empire - and in positions of power! It provided McKay the courage to later fiercely eschew the oppressiveness of Anglo-Saxon culture as well as single-minded bigots of the political left and right. Like Shaw, Olivier sought the herculean task of attempting to single-handedly redefine a socialistic movement based on a tempered humanism - what he later called a "larger socialism" - a project McKay attempted as well.

²³ *A Long Way from Home* (Harcourt Brace, 1970), p. 61, 64.

MCKAY'S ALIENATION AND OUTSIDER STATUS as a colonial is very real for us, and tangible. Likewise Shaw's antagonism to Empire, we can understand, as part of his Irishness – and therefore identify with. But how did Olivier become radicalized? At 25, two years out of Oxford, and studying for the civil service exam that would lead him onto a career with the Colonial Office, Olivier submitted a piece titled "John Stuart Mill and Socialism" to *To-Day*, an "exponent of scientific Socialism, and the unsparing assailant of modern forms of competitive anarchy." It summed up Olivier's uncomfortable relationship with radical politics. With Mill – and later Morris – Olivier found the answer to a "bloodless revolution." Echoing Mill, Olivier believed that an item's value was not based on the worker who makes it, but the usefulness of the product – a point that was explored in detail in an attack on "Perverse Socialism," which appeared in August and November of 1886.

"Perverse Socialism" develops a middle ground for radicals, such as Olivier, who were distrustful of Marx's state socialism. While "John Stuart Mill and Socialism" attempts to create an English socialist tradition, "Perverse Socialism" argues against the vanguard politics of the late nineteenth century radicalism. It espoused, for instance, profit sharing through collectivization (since Olivier was opposed to land nationalization,) one of the centerpieces of the socialist utopia. Henry Champion, an Oxford classmate, later

²⁴ Sydney Olivier: *Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 10.

denounced Olivier in an article (October 1886) that appeared in *Today*, titled "Socialists of the Armchair":

It is just this antagonism of classes which the Socialists of the Armchair cannot acknowledge. But it is precisely the recognition of its existence which defines the Socialist, and explains why he deliberately strives to fan the class-feeling of the workers into open flame. He sees the class war raging, with the dead and wounded all on one side. He sees no hope of its cessation, save by the victory of the army of labour, and to that end he devotes all his energies. There can be no peace till the enemy is vanquished and his arms taken from him. Therefore the more he desires peace the more vigorous are his blows, the louder his call to arms.²⁵

This was in fact a Georgist notion, and would become a rallying point for a diverse group of radicals who in 1882 organized the Land Reform Union, forerunner to the Fabian Society.²⁶

Olivier associated wars with land acquisition and echoed other intellectuals who demanded not an inch of "land or dollars" in pursuit of war. His disenchantment with British ways began in 1891 when the South African Chartered Company carried out its exploitative activities in Rhodesia, under Cecil Rhodes, that eventually led to the Lobengula and the first Matabele wars. The issue for Olivier was land rights. He associated this "complacent attitude," he wrote in *The Dual Ethic*, with a new aggressiveness in dealing with land-rights issues, and, along with Shaw, urged that colonial governments should be "democratized by the formation of local and native councils." But, as a compromise, power would still be retained by figureheads, "with our viceroys and governors working with them as Prime Ministers than as despots" (Olivier, *Dual Ethic* 92).

²⁵ October 1886, No. 34, p. 134.

The American economist Henry George's ideas of land use in *Progress and Poverty* (1879) synthesized Comte's notion of community with Mill's idea of individualist collectivity.

The idea of socialism is grand and noble; and it is, I am convinced, possible of realization; but such a state of society cannot be manufactured – it must grow. Society is an organism, not a machine.²⁶

Shaw noted the importance of George's organic view upon Fabian politics, in his preface to a 1931 edition of *Fabian Essays*, which Shaw likened to a kind of "economic sociology." Explaining their brand of socialism, "so that the reader need not fear oppression here, any more than in the socialized State of the future, by the ascendancy of one particular cast of mind" explained Graham Wallas in a 1889 preface, the Fabians took a holistic approach. They looked at the "Economic" aspect (Shaw), the "Historic" (Sidney Webb), the "Industrial" (William Clarke), the "Moral" (Olivier), "Property" (Wallas), and "Industry" by Annie Besant, who promoted secularism and birth control, and a proponent of East Indian self-determination. Both Clarke and Olivier carried through this notion of a "larger socialism" in the 1900 *Fabianism and the Empire, a Manifesto*, which called for international political and land reform. (Sidney Webb, in yet another preface, in 1920 encouraged what he termed "municipal socialism," which laid the foundation for later anarchist theories of bioregionalism and decentralization. Webb noted,

We accordingly saw our way to a vast increase in the consciousness of personal freedom, a vista of endless diversity, the practical opportunity for an indefinitely

²⁶ The Fabian's motto was "For the right moment, you must wait, as Fabius did, most patiently when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless."

²⁷ *Progress and Poverty* (New York Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1980), p. 126.

varied development of human personality, under the most complete and all-embracing Collectivism. We threw ourselves with energy into the study and the propaganda of 'Municipal Socialism,' the steady increase of which has resulted not merely in greatly widening the available experience of Collectivism, and in the placing, by 1919, of literally thousands of members of the Labour Party on Local Governing Bodies, but also in considerably filling out the vision of the organization of the Socialist State.²⁸

This "larger socialism" took shape in 1884, when Sidney Webb, Bernard Shaw, Graham Wallas, and Olivier, frustrated by the decline in socialist discourse, began issuing "manifestos" – as challenges to entrenched politics. In 1889 – the year radicals predicted a proletarian victory with the Dock Workers' Strike – appeared instead the *Fabian Essays*, the work of George Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, Graham Wallas, Sydney Olivier, William Clarke, Annie Besant, and Hubert Bland – who were all associated with the journal *To-Day*.

The journal was politically iconoclastic and published news and views from around the world, reflecting on late-Victorian imperialism, critiques of Marx, czarism, and even positivism. The journal also published literature: Walt Whitman's "Resurgemus" and "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence" and serialized plays by Henrik Ibsen and others. Contributors wrote on executions in Russia ("Sophia Perovskaia," executed on April 16, 1881 for attempting to assassinate the Czar, by H. Havelock Ellis, the sex radical), Darwinism, "Women and Socialism" and "Vegetarianism and Socialism." Two views that were prominently serialized over the years were Shaw's "Unsocial Socialist" and Marx's "Capital: A Criticism on Political Economy," two unique bookends that reflected an openness in political discourse.

²⁸ *Fabian Essays*, p. 274.

Central to society's subsistence, for Olivier, was "the produce of labour applied to the earth, and the question it sets before itself is, How are these means to be produced at least cost of such labour, and distributed most advantageously to society?" ²⁹ Olivier believed that society

must consider not merely what are the most efficient arrangements for producing within a limited time the greatest possible amount of 'commodities,' but what conditions will conduce to the prosperity of mankind. For as the desire of 'wealth' exists only in virtue of the utility of wealth to well-being, and as Political Economy has to do with the satisfaction of the desire for wealth, that country will be most economically prosperous in which there is the greatest amount of such comfort and happiness as may be ensured by the possession of those products of industry which, when satisfying the human necessity of well-living, are denominated wealth. Gluts of produce are not wealth. (494).

Olivier's views on the colonial issue in general were well-received. The American philosopher William James praised boldness in "White Man's Burden," which he called "a splendid document and a philanthropic act. I only wish that some Southerners might lay it to hear." ³⁰ Olivier so-called "moral socialism" would become the keystone of Fabian thinking. In place of labor revolt, Olivier saw the need for moral solidarity.

The moral education of the individual is the lesson, not that desire is evil, and that he can only attain his freedom by ceasing to desire, for this is death, or desertion, and the army of the living presses on to fuller life; but that the wider, fuller satisfaction is built upon the simpler, and common morality a condition of its possibility; that there are certain manners and methods in which, if he goes about to save his life, he most infallibly will lose it; and that love, the social instinct, and science, which is ordered knowledge, are his only reliable tutors in practical morality. ³¹

²⁹ "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," p. 494.

³⁰ James to Olivier, October 23, 1905. "The White Man's Burden" appeared in the *International Quarterly* the year before. *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 126.

³¹ *Fabian Essays*, "Fabian Socialism," p. 146.

The humanism that these early socialists (and, later, Fabians) espoused depended too much of the caprices and whims of the privileged classes. And eventually Fabians were attacked by the prevailing political hard-liners, who were more concerned with the working classes and industrialization than humanism and morality, as too unscientific, romantic, and lyrical.¹²

McKay, who was of a younger generation, still found something to admire, and called Olivier "the most brilliant statistician of the Fabian Socialists." Besides the appeal of Olivier's moral sense of balance, the poet was also impressed with the deep commitment of Fabian radicals to an anti-militarist philosophy. For McKay, this anti-militarism would be an important influence in shaping his career as a poet, which centered on dedicated pacifists like Crystal Eastman, C.K. Ogden, Sylvia Pankhurst, John Dewey, and of course George Bernard Shaw and John Dewey. The impression was left on him at an early age. "I remember when I was a school boy in Jamaica that the local militia was disbanded by the Governor," remarked McKay.

The local paper printed his statement that "such training for citizens is not necessary in an age of established peace, and anyway the people of the West Indies could not be concerned in any imaginary war of the future."¹³

Olivier also wrote on army reform as part of a general manifesto on revamping the British Empire in his manifesto. He viewed the military's sole function as a deterrent to

¹² A good point of entry to a study of the lyrical left, especially from the American side, is John Patrick Diggins' *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (Norton, 1992).

¹³ McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (Harcourt, Brace, 1970), p. 63. The war had a shattering effect on the Fabians, who believed that "a wholesale war of slaughter and carnage between the civilized nations was impossible; that the world was passing gradually from the cutthroat competitive to a co-operative stage." As McKay noted of that optimism: "I myself, under the influence of the international idealistic thought of that

war, which "interrupt's the world traffic, upsets its arrangements, debauches its citizens and its newspapers, and is in every way a costly and intolerable nuisance." He was appalled by compulsory military service.

The soldier is the only Englishman who is now legally a slave and an outlaw, retained in the service by force, and subject to a special form of law which sends him, without a jury, to prisons in which corporal punishment is still liberally inflicted.⁴⁴

Although McKay's brief time as a constabulary officer might seem puzzling to us (a contradictory position for the radical black colonial), he was part of Olivier's progressive experiment to "humanize" Empire. By volunteering, the poet softened the hard edges of colonial rule, which was Olivier's subversive intention as governor. McKay, then, functioned as Olivier's eyes and ears. He chronicled those colonial encounters in a book of poems titled *Constab Ballads*. One poem in particular, "The Bobby to the Sneering Lady," reads like an allegory on the new and old regimes, though cloaked in feminine attire. (Quite possibly "the Sneering Lady" stands as a rebuke to the suffrage movement, for its lack of commitment to colonial issues, which would soon be remedied.)

You may sneer at us madam,
But our work is beastly hard;
And 'while toilin' thus we scarce
Ever get a lee reward.

Our soul's jes like fe vou,
If our work does make us rough;
Me won't 'res' vou servant-gal
When you've beaten her enough.

period, used to think that way." After Olivier departed from Jamaica, conscription was implemented in Jamaica and England, and West Indian units served in France, Egypt, and Arabia.

⁴⁴ *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto*, p. 39.

You may say she is me friend,
We are used to all such prate;
Naught we meet on life's stern road
But the usual scorn and hate.

Say that you will port me m'am?
I was looking to that, - well,
Our Inspector's flinty hard,
'Twill be few days' pay or cell.

Pains and losses of such kind
To we policemen's not in' new;
Still A'd really like to hear
What good it will do to you.

Last week, eatin' a gill bread,
Me t'row piece out on de lea;
And A ketch a 'port to that
Which meant five roun' mac to me.

Constab-charge, civilian-charge.
Life's a burden every way;
But reward fund mus' kep' up
Out o' poo' policeman pay.

If our lot, then, is so hard,
I mus' ever bear in mind
That to be me own black 'kin
I mus' not be too unkind.

And p'r'aps you too will forgive
If I've spoken rather free,
And will let me somet'ing ask
Which may soften you to me:

In the middle o' the night,
When the blackness lies do'n deep,
Who protects your home and stores
While the Island is asleep?

When the dead stars cannot shine
Sake o' rain and cloud and storm,
Who keeps watch out in the street
So that not in' comes to harm?

Ah! You turn away your head!
See! There's pity in your face!
Son't, dead madam, bring on me
This unmerited disgrace.

In all, McKay's chronicles of life as a colonial bobby was, for Olivier, good public relations for a fresher view of the colonies that included trust and self-determination and not the stiff upper lip of British Kiplingism. The obedient, regimented black colonial who would maintain order and preserve the Empire, Olivier prophesied, was a failure doomed to backfire. ³⁵

OLIVIER WAS BORN ON APRIL 16, 1859, IN COLCHESTER, ENGLAND, eleven years after the appearance of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, an ideology he would argue with and sometimes embrace throughout his life. His father was a reverend, and his family descended from French Huguenots. Olivier attended Corpus Christi College at Oxford, and wrote *Poems and Parodies* while a student. Although he read a range of philosophical and socialistic works – Fournier, Comte, Schopenhauer, Mill, and Morris – he decided on a career as a reformist civil servant in the colonies. His literary interests made him stand out among colonial administrators, and achieved a reputation as “a literary governor” when McKay had encountered him. ³⁶ Tired “of the prevailing brutality of traditional British Toryism,” Olivier's socialism evolved as he immersed himself in the politics of the Colonial Office. ³⁷

³⁵ Olivier supported a more integrated “militia”; a police force that was took the shape of “fighting civilians.” *Fabianism and the Empire, A Manifesto*, p. 40.

³⁶ McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

³⁷ “Not Much: A Fragment of Autobiography,” *Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, p. 26.

Both Olivier and Shaw disliked the way Marxists moralized and pandering to the working class (Shaw had written of the unending “shibboleths” of “Class War” in his preface to the 1908 edition to *Fabian Essays*), much as McKay became angered by the way radicals exceptionalized people of color as saviors and vanguards, and wrote of black and white fiends.¹⁸ Then appeared *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto*, which worked against “the ignorant pride of pre-eminence of race.” Its approach to “the dominance of Empire” was “by a recognition, among all States and peoples – to use a phrase of John Stuart Mill – ‘that best kind of equality, reciprocal superiority’ ” – a vague assumption that civility would prevail over capital and deed. Locally – and more practically – *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto* hoped to influence elections by making the colonial question part of the discourse.

The South African War of 1899, much like the Spanish American War for the United States, turned “the colonial question” around, and many Fabians viewed imperialism as part of the industrial problems at home. “The forthcoming General Election will turn,” the editors predicted, “mainly on the popularity of Imperialism” (*Empire and Fabianism* 1). England’s involvement in South Africa – called the Boer War, from 1899 to 1902 – was not very popular, but England eventually annexed the South African territories. Fabian socialists accused the government as catering to special interests. The war itself was not about principles or humanitarian interests, but about greed – the

¹⁸ “ ‘The ‘Black Fiend’ goes for the black brute,” McKay explained to C.K. Ogden in a letter of March 12, 1920. McKay wrote two poems that complemented each other: “The White Fiend,” published in *Pearson’s Magazine* in 1918, and “Black Fiend,” which was unpublished. Ogden selected “Black Fiends” for McKay’s

pursuit of wealth and gold. To the Fabians, particularly Olivier, the choice was starkly apparent, the symbolism of two ideologies: gold or farming. In a letter to H.G. Wells, Olivier called South Africa "the most dunder-headed white community in the world."

I should say that the methods that were adopted for the Imperialisation of Africa were definitely methods of the Capitalist System enthusiastically applied by believers in it. It so happened that South Africa had not extricated itself from the Slave System when the mining industry was thrust into it and the Land Syndicate method of development was set running. The combination is the direct and demonstrable matrix of the poor-white problem in South Africa, the White Labour Party's apprehensions and the idiotic colour-bar policy which is being adopted to meet them. (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings* 160).

Webb in his 1920 preface addressed the international question, and called for "an organized 'inter-nationalism,' in which national characteristics among the manual-working wage earners no less than among Governments, far from becoming obliterated or straightened out into a mechanical uniformity, would be not only separately developed, but also differentiated even further than at present." Fabians believed in a kind of mutual respect based on one's expertise, which borders on a conception of class as caste.

We counted on each racial group or Nation-State pursuing its own evolution, and shaping its own destiny, uninterruptedly in its own way, intensifying thereby its characteristic faculties, and thus increasing the special services that it could render to the world; in order to enrich the common future, not only by exchange but actually by the continuous increase of a desirable variety in qualities and achievements, even in such secondary matters as costume and language. We held that, whilst profiting to the utmost by what we could learn from each other, and without imagining or seeking a superiority which it is, between combinations of qualitative differences, always impossible to measure, to behooves the British to be

chapbook, Spring in New Hampshire. But McKay cautioned that "American coloured opinion won't relish it." William Ready.

as good Britons as they can possibly make themselves, and the French as good Frenchmen. This, at any rate, was the synthesis between patriotism and internationalism that we evolved for ourselves; and to this we tenaciously held; yielding neither to 'Imperialism' on the one hand, nor to 'Little Englandism' on the other.³⁹

Olivier added a prescient postcolonial twist to Webb's "inter-nationalism":

The one cannot perceive the other as a full cup; he makes for himself a ridiculous broken caricature of a few striking characterisations as a hypothesis of the foreign creature's nature, and fills out the figure with the attributes of the children of the imbeciles and criminals of his own nationality.⁴⁰

Such a mental state resonates in McKay's conflicts as a colonial writer, who was educated by the privileged upper classes. Thus he could appreciate Olivier's sarcasm. He would not immerse himself in "Africa" or even attempt to sketch "Negro life in its pure state." He concluded:

I don't believe that any such place exists anywhere upon the earth today, since modern civilization has touched and stirred the remotest corners.⁴¹

Yet Olivier went further than any radical at that time in seeking a practical solution to the colonial impasse (and accused of negrophilia, a derisive term even today), in such work as *Empire and Fabianism* and *White Capital and Coloured Labour*, and had one advantage: he was on the front lines, in the colonies. This was a far cry, indeed, from earlier accusations of armchair socialism. As governor, he could work for the common good and put into practice much of the theory of Fabian socialism. This was clearly the perspective in McKay's "Ways O the Pleasants":

³⁹ *Fabian Essays*, p. 278.

⁴⁰ Olivier, *White Capital*, p. 18.

⁴¹ *The Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 137.

A piece o' lan' te raise two goat,
A little rum te ease we t'roat,
A little cot te res' we head -
An' we're contented tell we dead.

And in *The League of Nations and Primitive Peoples* (1918), Olivier expressed concern over geopolitical realignments, in the aftermath of WWI. Olivier also argued against racial chauvinism and the notion of a "White Man's Burden" which he saw as irrational "negrophobia." Olivier invariably wanted to bring *that* burden home to the election polls and lecture halls for discussion. "But it is not only cultured and civilized races that know themselves more than the beef-witted race that conquers them," Olivier wrote.

... So long as they remain a race their God, their will, their pride of place as a chosen people, survives; and they see, often, that the conqueror is only a heavy-fisted brute, to whom they know themselves superior, not, indeed, in all valuable qualities, but in many of those which mankind most values and which are most distinctly human.⁴²

Olivier's arguments are richly textured in McKay's poetry that was written around the time of the League's formation. "The criticism," Olivier explained, "which one race may pass upon another will almost always be somewhat impertinent and provincial." McKay, too, wrote of the "provincialism" of nations in his poem "Africa":

Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,
Of all the might nations of the sun.⁴³

More importantly, such works as *White Capital and Coloured Labour* were part of the staple of Uriah Theodore, and McKay early education - standard texts for Jamaicans of all

⁴² Olivier, *White Capital*, p. 27.

⁴³ *The Liberator*, August 1921, p. 10.

shades. Thus the concept of "race" finds its endurance in oppression. Only when McKay move to America in 1912, would he fully explore *his* complicity in "The White Man's Burden." In "The Dominant White," color represents an all-pervasive evil that oppresses the "lesser peoples." Blacks and yellow are maligned, and all are "hybridized" into "bastard" cultures. "Truth" and "Beauty" crumble under the same skepticism toward civilization that Percy Shelley described in "Ozymandias," the "king of kings" who withers "boundless and bare." So, too, warns McKay, will whiteness be humbled "down to dust."

God gave you power to build and help and lift;
But you proved prone to persecute and slay
And from the high and noble course to drift
Into the darkness from the light of day
He gave you law and order, strength of will
The lesser peoples of the world to lead;

You chose to break and crush them through life's mill,
But for your earthly pins to make them bleed:
Because you've proved unworthy of your trust,
God - He shall humble you down to the dust.

You have betrayed the black, maligned the yellow;
But what else could we hope of you who set
The hand even of your own against his fellow;
To stem the dire tide that threatens yet?
You called upon the name of your false god
To lash our wounded flesh with knotted cords
And trample us into the blood-stained sod,
And justified your deeds with specious words:
Oh! you have proved unworthy of your trust,
And God shall humble you down to the dust.

The pain you gave us nothing can assuage,
Who hybridized a proud and virile race,
Bequeathed to it a bastard heritage
And made the black ashamed to see his face.
You ruined him, put doubt into his heart,
You set a sword between him and his kin,
And preached to him, with simple, lying art
About the higher worth of your white skin!
Oh White Man! You have trifled with your trust
And God shall humble you down to the dust.

McKay toys with stereotyped images of whiteness: the English "White Man's Burden" as well as his own sense of justice. The poem is a broad criticism of the so-called uplift mandate and its well-meaning intentions; the poem also alludes to the history of devastation in the Congo, and other racial abuses. It was Rudyard Kipling who first "urged on the hunt of Anglo-Saxon imperialism with lyrical exhortation," offering Americans a piece of the Empire, while instilling the idea of compulsory labour, military service, and penal taxation as the colonial condition.⁴⁴ Far worse, for Olivier and McKay, is that this condition has "militarized" the peasants, who believe, as their masters do, in the "higher worth" of guns and bullets. As a constabulary officer, McKay quickly became sensitized to neocolonial collaborators who, like himself, would briefly wear "de red seam" – the marking of the colonial policeman's uniform – of imperialism. In "The Heart of a Constab," he writes

You blinded go, afraid to see the Truth,
Closing your eyes to and denying Beauty;
You stultify the dreams of visioned youth
All in the prostituted name of Duty.
You place your Seers with madmen, fools and rogues,
Their words distort and twist, despise their creed:
You choose instead the little demagogues
That will uphold you in your shameless greed:
Because you've proved unworthy of your trust,
Oh, He shall humble you! – down to the dust.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Olivier, "The White Man's Burden at Home," *International Quarterly* (April 1905, p. 6.

⁴⁵ "The Heart of a Constab," published in 1912 soon after McKay quit a tour of duty with the Jamaican Constabulary, ends:

"Oh! Where are de faces I loved in de past,
De frien's dat I used to hold dear?
Oh sav, have dey all turned away from me now
Beausen de red seam I wear?"

This rootedness is integral for both the success of Olivier's politics and McKay's survival as a colonial. But it also reflected vernacular stirrings elsewhere, in England and America (around such ideas as primitivism, the garden movement, the New Negro, etc.). When McKay writes, as in does in "Hard Times," of the withering of crops, radicals such as Olivier would grasp the significance.

When a race has been established and maintained itself for generations in a particular environment . . . Such a race, in the vigour of its maturity, is a full cup; its form is saturated to the skin with energy that has forced it into a mould of life appointed;; it is sensitive at the surface, reacting immediately according to its own native impulse, not critical of its impulses, nor hesitant between feeling and action, thought and word, not skeptical where it believes. ⁴⁰

Olivier's "larger socialism," then, had more to do with the dynamics of *difference* – a view he shared with McKay and, later, with other internationalists – than it did with a *program* of revolutionary class struggle. (When McKay spoke at the Third International in Moscow in 1922, he echoed Olivier's analysis of the international labor crisis, one which would only be resolved by coming to an understanding of "difference.") Olivier, in fact, viewed difference as a catalyst for change. The Fabians were concerned with traditional labor conflicts but thought globally, particularly regarding the South African War, which began in 1899. They proposed "the formation of local and native councils," in which colonial governors would behave more like "Prime Ministers rather than as despots." At a time when Empire was itself in transition, "The White Man's Burden at Home" revealed a sensitivity to race and the colonial predicament unmatched by most radicals who thought uniformly and hegemonically. When McKay wrote of "The Intrenched Classes" he had in

⁴⁰ Olivier, *White Capital*, p. 15.

mind those of Olivier's ilk, who struggled against the very same forces of empire that employed and nurtured them. McKay's mention of "Bourbon fears," for instance, alludes not only to Olivier's mixed French ancestry but European prejudices as well.

Your power is legion, but it cannot crush,
Because my soul's foundation is cast-steel,
And my myriads of unseen bodies rush
From hidden bowers and shrines my wounds to heal.
Your petty irritants are tiny spears
That cannot pierce through my protecting mail
To mortal hurt, and all your Bourbon fears,
Quite warrantable, never grinding down today,
Like a great landslip moving to the sea,
Bearing its freight of debris far away,
Where the green hungry waters restlessly
Heave mammoth pyramids and break and roar
Their eerie challenge to the crumbling shore.

Olivier's middle ground, in which he attacked Marxism and imperialism, placed him in a peculiar position politically – a place McKay found himself as well. While Marxists might argue for a vanguard, Olivier's socialism was more *sui generis* – gradually winning over society by its abilities at arguing the common sense of revolutionary change. Society would perfect itself as it slowly eliminated poverty, misery, war, and exploitation.⁴⁷ Through McKay, Olivier's "revolutionary vision" continued on. Like Douglass, who advocated for an "intermediate" race, Olivier saw advantages to places like Jamaica, which were vital and firmly rooted to the soil, as well as culturally diverse incubators. McKay again echoes Olivier's idealization of Jamaica in the poem "My House."

⁴⁷ Critical assessments of Olivier among contemporary scholars have been lukewarm. For instance, the historian Winston James in *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (Verso 2000), has tried to make a case for Olivier's unpopularity among all classes of Jamaicans. He points out that the *Daily Gleaner* ran uncomplimentary articles that were critical of his work as governor. I did not find that to be the case. In fact, beginning in October of 1912, when it was rumored that Olivier would not

For this peculiar tint that paints my house
Peculiar in an alien atmosphere
Where other houses have the same pale hue,
I have a feeling always very rare
And romance-making in my ardent blood,
That channels through my body like a flood.

I know the dark delight of being strange,
The penalty of difference in the crowd,
The loneliness of wisdom among fools,
Yet never have I felt but very proud,
Though I have suffered agonies in hell,
Of living in my own peculiar cell.

There is an exaltation of man's life,
His inner life that he alone may feel,
The blended fires that beat his veins within,
Shaping his metals into lasting steel,
Are kindled flaming from the secret hearth
That the wise gods bequeathed to him at birth.

For each man's mind contains its unknown realm,
Walled in from other men, however near,
Who cannot reach it even in highest flights
Of comprehension or of vision clear;
That realm where one withdraws to contemplate
Infinity to his own finite state.

Thence he may sometimes catch a godlike glimpse
Of mysteries that gloom beyond life's bar;
Thence he may hurl his little shaft at heaven,
And bring down accidentally a star,
And drink its foamy dust like sparkling wine
And echo accents of the laugh divine.

Then he may fall into a drunken sleep
And wake up in his own house painted blue,
Or white or green or red or brown or black-
His house, his own, whatever be the hue.
And things for him will not be what they seem
To other men since he has had his dream.⁴⁶

Keenly aware of his own mongrel heritage, Olivier remarked that "I do not go so far as to say that a man to be a good critic must be a hybrid, but I fancy it would be found it be

seek another term, a number of highly laudatory pieces appeared in the newspaper, and continued until he left Jamaica in January 1913.

⁴⁶ *Opportunity* (November 1926), p. 342.

pretty true" (Olivier, *White Capital* 25). A critic, according to Olivier's logic, was someone who can weigh differences and is motivated to improve society. It is not a surprise that Olivier was an admirer of William James, whose work on pragmatism and cultural diversity influenced Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois.⁴⁹

Whereas the pure race in its prime knows one Man only, itself, and one God, its own Will, the hybrid is incapable of this exclusive racial pride, and inevitably becomes aware that there is something; the something that we call Human, which is greater than one race or the other, and something in the nature of spiritual power that is stronger than natural God or Will.⁵⁰

While McKay admitted that he was of pure blood (at times boastfully), he admired a range of colors – the “motley mix,” as he called it. His novels and poems display a range of shades, from coffee to earth. He was, however, bitter about the uses of color, in the colonial context, when it becomes a badge of class distinction rather than an emblem of pride. This was particularly true in America, to his puzzlement. To use Gordon, a mulatto, as a symbol of revolt is to remind those of that class – in Jamaica, America, and elsewhere – of the work that still needs to be done. Likewise, “Mulatto” speaks to those same concerns. It also finds a place in the African American canon alongside pieces by Charles Chesnutt, such as “The Sheriff’s Children,” and Langston Hughes’ play, *The Mulatto*.

Because I am the white man's son - his own,
Bearing his bastard birth-mark on my face,
I will dispute his title to his throne,
Forever fight him for my rightful place.
There is a searing hate within my soul,
A hate that only kin can feel for kin,
A hate that makes me vigorous and whole,

⁴⁹ See George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Harvard U P, 1995); also Ross Posnick's *Color & Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Harvard U P, 1998).

⁵⁰ Olivier, *White Capital*, p. 25.

And spurs me on unceasingly to win.
Because I am my cruel father's child,
My love of justice stirs me up to hate,
A warring Ishmaelite, unreconciled,
When falls the hour I shall not hesitate,
Into my father's heart to plunge the knife
To gain the utmost freedom that is life.

But Olivier, the pragmatist, also knew that those irreconcilable racial differences – and resentment – would persist. The “final forms of truth,” as he called the glue that held “races” together, when forced to compete are “naturally destructive and each recognizably insufficient.” It is the hybrid who “finds himself very much alive,” and “not at all extinguished” when confronted with racial theories that bolster class and exploitation (Olivier, *White Capital* 26).

JAMAICA HAD ITS EFFECTS ON OLIVIER, AS IT DID ON MCKAY. Both left soon after this disagreement. Olivier reluctantly returned to England, swallowed his pride, and accepted an appointment as secretary to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in England. McKay traveled to Kansas, Missouri, to study agriculture, on a scholarship that Olivier helped to obtain. The West Indies had a special place for Olivier, which he characterized as a “nigger’s paradise.” When he was governor, his vacations in England no longer appealed to him, and he called the citadel of Empire an unpleasant “domicile for an educated man,” echoing the feelings of another expatriate, Walter Jekyll. He pointed out to Graham Wallas in a November 1903 letter: “In the Colonies, of course, we see the worst side” of Empire – but there are “healthy elements.” Noted Shaw: “The more Olivier wrote, the plainer it was

in Downing Street that he was pro-negro and not pro-planter, and that he must be kept out of the colonies all cost" (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings* 18).

For all the criticism and condemnation, Olivier's socialism in Jamaica, as governor from 1907 to 1913, found an outlet in the poetic idealism of Claude McKay. In "Moral," first published in 1889, the governor wrote,

Socialism is but a stage in the undending progression out of weakness and the ignorance in which society and the individual are born, towards the strength and the enlightenment in which they can see and choose their own way forward - from the chaos where morality is not to the consciousness which sees that morality is reason; and to have made some attempt to justify the claims that the cardinal virtue of socialism is nothing else than Common Sense. ("Moral," *Fabian Essays*, 1889, p. 127-28)⁵¹

Such "common-sense" thinking was part of the cunning McKay used in his travels throughout the world, in his numerous rebirths and transformations, in which he was also seeking a home. Thus, the poet's nostalgic longings must be seen in this way: Jamaica was - really - the political ideal he could never return to.

McKay was 10 years old when Olivier first arrived, and a teenager when he was governor. Like Oliver, who traveled from England to Jamaica, South America, India, and Africa, McKay applied passion, reason and above all, "common sense" to a life of "vagabondage."⁵² It is not difficult to see a connection between Olivier's political and geo-

⁵¹ Waldo Frank characterized Western, industrial culture as "mechanical" in his manifesto, *Our America*, published in 1919, a crucial year in the diasporic chronology. He wrote: "Mechanical progress split life into myriad mechanical departments. Every machine had a thousand parts. Every calling had a thousand machines. Newspaper and Technical school and telegraph and telephone loaded the average minds with a surfeit of details to be mastered for the making of money," page 223, in the chapter "The Turning of the Soil."

⁵² Sister M. James Conroy, in "The Vagabond Motif in the Writings of Claude McKay," in *Negro American Literature Forum* 5 (1971), relates McKay's condition to a general state of rootlessness symptomatic of cultural dissolution. This early period, in America, induced much soul-searching and vagabondage inspired Floyd Dell

graphic restlessness, and McKay's later perambulations through America and the Commonwealth. "I am a man of rather active and impatient mind," Olivier once observed, which provided an opening for McKay's own "mania for traveling." But for the colonial poet his impatience had more to do with the condition and texture of race.

to give this movement a moral mission, which he explored in *Intellectual Vagabondage: An Apology for the Intelligentsia* (New York: Doran, 1926). A few of the Harlem Renaissance-era writers, particularly Langston Hughes, were included in the brotherhood. But as John Lowney has noted in his analysis of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, vagabondage took on peculiar characteristics of a Diaspora as it migrated across racial and national boundaries ("Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of *Home to Harlem*," *African American Review* 34:3).

3

Walter Jekyll and "The Real Thing"

My thoughts often go back to my old home in Surrey, thirty-odd miles from London. It was a paradise for boys, with its shrubberies full of birds' nests, its orchards of apples, and – greatest of all – its two large ponds where we fished in summer and skated in winter. Would there be bearing ice or not? – that for us was the great question as the end of the year approached.¹

THE OTHER PIECE TO THIS COLONIAL SYMBIOSIS IS WALTER JEKYL, the expatriate iconoclast, who happened to be in Jamaica at the same time, doing ethnography work while sending botanical field reports back to the empire. Along with his sister in England, who found simplistic virtues in the peasantry of West Surrey, extolling the native folkways in pockets of resistance throughout England, Walter Jekyll was a chronicler of the Diaspora in the Caribbean.² It is nonetheless humorous that Jekyll, a politically conservative upper-class Englishman who resented Olivier for his mongrelized English ways, should pursue a

¹ Walter Jekyll, in the *Jamaican Daily Gleaner*, December 14, 1912.

² The product of his research resulted in *Jamaican Song and Story; Annancy Stories, Digging Songs, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* (1907). A later edition was reprinted by Dover in 1966, with introductory essays by Philip Sherlock, Louise Bennett and Rex Nettleford. "Annancy" is the Jamaican word for "Spider," and derives from the "Twi" (West African) "Ananse." An Anancy rope is a spider's web, and "Anancy stories" feature the spider as the chief character. Anancy characters are known as people of Ghana. Among the old characters are Anancy, his wife Crooky, his son Tacooma, and Asunu the elephant. Anancy, who is the central figure of the stories, is sometimes a man but more often a spider with human qualities and characteristics.

study of creole culture in the remote hilltops of Jamaica that aided in the dissolution of the old order.

Arriving in Jamaica at the turn of the century (considered by many a colonial Eden), Walter Jekyll built a modest bungalow (with peasant labor of course), 17 miles outside Kingston, high in the Port Royal Mountains, near a roaring river with spectacular views of the island. It was an idyllic setting, inaccessible on three sides, with sheer drops. When Jekyll's brother, Herbert, and his wife Agnes Graham visited in 1911, at the publication of Walter's *The Wisdom of Shopenhauer as revealed in some of His Principal Writings*, he had been on the island for eleven years, and comfortably living a life of "modified Buddhism" – "a philosopher's life of plain living and high thinking."³ Jekyll rarely traveled once he moved to his island retreat (although he spent vacations there intermittently since his mother died in 1895). His world was circumscribed by Kingston at one end and the Royal Mountains at the other. He lived sparsely and frugally on a family inheritance that was used, in part, to help pay for McKay's education and passage to America.⁴ In addition to his ethnographic research, he wrote articles on Jamaican native plants and garden design for the London horticulture magazine *The Garden* in 1900, which was edited by his sister Gertrude. As a result of such work, he was commissioned to produce an authoritative *Guide to Hope Gardens*, published in 1903 by Aston W. Gardner & Co., in Kingston, Jamaica. (Kingston, indeed, was a small place, and Jekyll would approach his publisher again, sometime in 1911, when working on McKay's manuscript,

³ Agnes Jekyll, *Ne Oublie* (privately printed, p. xi; qtd. in *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 212.

⁴ *Gertrude Jekyll*, by Sally Festing, p. 120.

Songs of Jamaica.) The garden became the jewel of Jamaica, and McKay would fondly name his daughter in honor of it.

Both brothers - Herbert in his travels as a representative of, first, the Colonial, then later, the War Office; Walter while in Jamaica - contributed to the journal, which became an outlet for colonial horticultural information: Walter, for instance, wrote "A Garden in Jamaica" column, discussing his treks to Kingston and the environs around his cottage in the mountains, while Herbert offered advice on ways to use plants to conceal telegraph poles and lines - those obstinate outcroppings of imperial culture that irritated Gertrude and Walter. As expected, the Jekyll brothers differed politically. (One might even conjecture that Walter's break with British society was a reaction to Herbert's more bellicose activities in the colonies.)

Herbert epitomized the British imperial mandate, which swept aside fine nuances of geography and place. A fierce proponent of Empire, he was commissioned to fight in the Ashanti Wars in Ghana, a British protectorate since 1850, when the British Colonial Office purchased Danish interests and thereby ignited tribal warfare between the Fanti Confederation, which it supported, and the Ashanti Confederation, of the interior. The *Times of London* obituary (September 30, 1932) characterized Herbert Jekyll as "True to his tradition of R.T.E. officer," who "combined a somewhat shy and retiring disposition with the highest standards of efficiency and thoroughness" - in other words, he was a true

Englishman. While Herbert was securing the colonies and taming the wilderness, Walter was completing his studies at Trinity College and embarking on a career as a minister.⁵

In contrast to Walter's idyllic lifestyle in the hilltops of Jamaica, Herbert's work as a civil engineer took him to Europe as part of the Royal Commission for the Paris Exhibition of 1900, where he patched Anglo-French relations that were fractured over colonial infighting during Fashoda and the South African War.⁶ Herbert moved from the Colonial Office to the War Office unlike Olivier, who was happy to be a civil servant, and eventually became an assistant to Lord Carnarvon, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. He retired from government work in 1911. (It must be emphasized that though Herbert and Walter reflected two reactions to empire, they were still nevertheless privileged by their ruling class status, and used the colonies for their ends.)

Herbert's adventures in the War Office, while in West Africa, were tempered by his interests in horticulture. In fact, gardening and the simple life seemed a Jekyll trademark – or an emblem of their class. Even Herbert was an enthusiastic gardener and a proponent of the arts and crafts movement, within limits of course – in addition to being an organist at the Royal College, a member of the Bach Choir, and a wood-carver. Herbert's life was softened by his marriage to Agnes Graham, herself a gardener, who would later write a

⁵ In 1850 the British Colonial Office purchased Danish interests in the region and gave some protection to the coastal Fanti Confederation, while. The inland areas were dominated by the Ashanti. After the colony of the Gold Coast was established, Britain went to war with the Ashanti in 1824 and 1784, occupying the capital of Kumasi. Further wars against the Ashanti followed in 1896 and 1900. In 1920 the colony demanded home rule. In 1957 the Gold Coast and British Togoland to the east were combined to become the independent Republic of Ghana, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, the first British African colony to be granted independence.

⁶ He also did a little interior design work on the side, and assembled the British Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition, with Edwin Lutyens, Gertrude Jekyll's associate.

series of articles for *The Times of London*, published in 1922 as *Kitchen Essays, with Recipes and Their Occasions*. A Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Agnes Jekyll noted that “old-established standards and experience have in many cases disappeared during the recent years of upheaval” in modernist and popular culture at the turn of the century. Salvaging these time-honored recipes was Agnes’ revolt against the twentieth century: “when homes dissolve and re-form, or the main prop of a household is withdrawn, it is often found that a good tradition or a valued formula, painstakingly acquired, has vanished beyond recovery, and that the pleasant things we enjoyed in youth . . . have all been swept irrevocably down Time’s rolling stream” (*Kitchen Essays* vii-viii). Herbert, too, tried his hand at mixing the colonial pot, so to speak. For instance, when the Royal Engineers began erecting telephone lines, Herbert found that the Aloe species (which he called *Agave telegraphica*) could be used creatively to hide “unsightly poles” – an interesting attempt at colonial transparency.

This highly ornamental plant flourishes best by the side of roads and on railway embankments and I can strongly recommend it . . . feeling it would succeed admirably at the ends of the high-road at the foot of your lawn, where it would be seen to great advantage from your drawing-room windows.⁷

However, it is Herbert’s “drawing-room window” that is the more intriguing vantage, and gives us insight into the boundaries of Herbert’s imperialist vista. It also is a way to introduce – and juxtapose – some of the concerns and tensions of the colonial perspective of the so-called native, such as we find in McKay’s “The Biter Bit.” Like

⁷ Herbert Jekyll, quoted in Festing, p. 82.

Herbert, the “ole woman” sits by the “kitchen doo” and gazes at her landscape as her “calalu a grow.”

Ole woman sit by kitchen doo’
Is watchin’ calalu a grow,
An’ all de time a t’inking dat
She gwin go nvam dem when dem fat.

The more naturalized gaze from the doorway is the colonial complement to the vista from the drawing-room window, where nature is asked to collaborate in disguising imperial markers. While Herbert is preoccupied with “unsightly poles,” the woman’s perspective speaks to the struggles of harvesting, when

Corn an’ peas growin’ t’ick an’ fas’
Wid nice blade peepin’ t’rough de grass;
An’ ratta from dem hole a peep,
T’ink all de corn dem gwin’ go reap.

From this doorway, we see a natural cycle play out – but it is a cycle that, in the colonies, plays off-register. How do we interpret the dynamic between the farmer, who feels entitled to the corn harvest, and a rat that simply needs to eat? Is the rat that “unsightly pole” that refuses to blend into the background? The poet explains: “But Quaco knows a t’ing or two,” and puts out a “little meal” for those who possess “fas’ fas’ mout’.” As in the poem “Reapers,” by Jean Toomer, the rat represents both predator and victim. In our reading of “The Biter Bit,” we find that the poet has grafted Herbert’s drawing-room view onto the old woman’s peasant perspective. By doing this, he creates an unsettling moment. However, the rat also symbolizes the natural world, which has been forced to scavenge by the “machine” – the progress of “the reaper” as it cuts the harvest. The symbolism in “The Biter Bit” has less to do with this particular machine (and Toomer’s own ambivalence about African-American invisibility) than with a symbiotic colonial relationship, which has

unbalanced the natural world. The rat, for McKay, becomes a reminder of that delimited imperial gaze, which characterizes – and haunts – the befuddled civil engineer's framed perspective.

Walter Jekyll would help McKay master that bifurcated perspective. Unlike Herbert, Walter stepped outside of that frame and found his identity in the primitivism of the jungles and mountaintops of the Jamaican countryside. More importantly, Jekyll's time in Jamaica coincided with Claude McKay's coming of age. In Jekyll's work, McKay saw the things that interested the English ruling class, such as folk esthetics and gardening, contrariness and eccentricity. Yet Walter Jekyll was a varied and talented teacher. In his unique way, he was rebel, bohemian, cultivated gardener, and blasphemist, who had a passion for the culture of Schopenhauer, Shakespeare, and Goethe, as well as the African-derived *annancy* tradition, the trickster spider popular among the peasants. He had an ear for Italian librettos as well as the *jammies* and *shay-shays* of the Jamaican hills, and was a stern literary critic as well, cautioning McKay on his maiden voyage to America that he should cultivate his own poetic style.

The *annancy* tradition that Jekyll formalized offered McKay and other colonial writers the cultural space to navigate a range of prejudices and preconceptions. It is in the art of *annancy*, Walter Jekyll remarked, that one becomes “an accomplished actor,” able to “assume any character.” *Annancy* has its roots in Africa, and is the trickster hero of Asante. It survives by cunning, much as the slaves survived as they were torn from their homelands and forced to labour in a foreign land. If they themselves could not triumph over “*bukra massa*,” the white man, at least their *imagination*, in the creation of *annancy*, would, so the

thinking went. Jekyll was the first European to package annancy for general consumption – and for that he deserves a compliment, whatever his class or prejudices signify, particularly at a time when the imperialist machine was at its destructive heights. The book itself was an inspiration to colonial writers to make their songs heard. Although McKay knew annancy, to see it in print would have been a powerful incentive to write, and, no doubt, encouraged the young peasant-poet to master one of many easy routes into the soul of British Empire. Critic Michael North writes that McKay's "Dialect, tea meetings, perhaps, even obeah and sex, become beautiful only when touched by the wand of English approval," such as Jekyll's interest in folk culture and dialect. Dialect, in fact, as North suggests, united English aristocracy and exploited peasantry against the "pinching middle class" and the steady progression of modernity – a world of middling civil servants and Ruyard Kiplings (102). A poem like McKay's "Quashie to Buccra" works at the annancy frequency. As North sees it, the poem is aimed at readers "who would associate dialect with happy-go-lucky peasants," someone who would feel comfortable with a poetic form that reduced, on the surface at least, "the obfuscation and indirection of the annancy role to the level of childish playacting" (107-8). North suggests that had Jekyll known the implications of dialect, he would have been less motivated to promote it. For North, Quashie is he master of "the congo-saw," or double talk (the "smiling mask" that Henry Louis Gates describes in detail as the signifying monkey) and he sees McKay's *Songs of Jamaica* simplistically as "the fight to get Annancy back" (107). North imagines McKay as resisting rather than accommodating Englishness. I believe, however, that Jekyll's interest in dialect was not so much motivated by dialect's playfulness than in its ability to confront,

informed” but also “so childlike” (a trait that would be used to characterize McKay as well). He was also “too clever for his age.”⁹ Yet even at 17 he was recognized by his family as someone not “easily forced into standard moulds.”¹⁰ He rebelled against school, which was “the beginning of Walter’s plight in fitting the pattern prescribed by his family.”¹¹

Jekyll preferred the eccentricity of Gertrude, and the two staked their territories in battling modernity. Brother and sister vacationed together when they were in their twenties, and traveled to Venice and Milan. At 30, she “chaperoned” Walter to Chalet de Sonzier at Lake Geneva, where they “sketched, gardened and walked in flowery meadows before settling to evenings of improvised music and drama”¹² The vacation also included an elder Hercules Brabazon, “who loves young men and fathers them,” and first introduced Jekyll to homosexual desire. The number of unmarried males (and females), Sally Festing points out, from the decorative arts suggests that homosexuality, like eccentricity, was tacitly tolerated, but overt sexual behavior was not even considered. It is this meeting that we get an inkling of Walter’s sexuality – and the world he and Gertrude shared. (Both Walter and Gertrude never married.)¹³ While Walter stayed in Europe, Gertrude traveled to Algeria.

After a brief vacation in 1875 in Malta, and a detour in Milan, where he studied voice with Francesco Lamperti (a later project involved translating Lamperti’s *The Art of Singing according to Ancient Tradition*), Walter began to question English privilege more

⁹ Reminiscences of Lady Duff Gordon and Walter’s older sister Caroline, quoted in *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 55.

¹² Ibid., p. 71.

forcefully. On his return to England, he rejected the elitism of his upbringing, and began to give "penny singing lessons to poor people."¹⁴ In the *Bible Untrustworthy*, Jekyll wrote that he always sympathized with the downtrodden/rote that "I always identified myself with the lost. How could I hope to escape damnation - for I understood the parable but too well - when it was only the few that were saved? . . . I was the rich man - did I not belong to that well-to-do class of which it is said, How hardly shall a rich man enter into the kingdom of heaven?" (W. Jekyll; *Bible* 283).

By 1876, at the age of 30, he served the Anglican Church in various capabilities, as a deacon at Rochester, then as a canon at Worcester Cathedral. But he was still unclear about his career. It wasn't until the publication of *The Bible Untrustworthy* (London: Watts), in 1904, that Jekyll formally severed ties with the Church, and espoused a type of colonial Rationalism that was tinged with Buddhism. In the colonies, Rationalism mirrored the activities in England and had its own society and press. Members espoused a "higher criticism," in which interpreted religion as only one aspect of contemporary life. Among Roman Catholics in the 20th century, such "high criticism" developed into liberation theology, which originated in Latin America, which encouraged natives to revolt. Dorothy Day, an editor at *The Masses* who maintained a close relationship with McKay through his latter life, was a leading proponent of liberation theology through her efforts at the Catholic Worker, a left radical Roman Catholic organization that still operates a shelter, pantry, and outreach on the Lower East Side. Jekyll set out on a course that would

¹³ Sally Festing, *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 72.

eventually take him to Jamaica, where he would immerse himself in the folkways of the Caribbean, much like his sister's retreat toward the local, folk simplicity of West Surrey.

In Jamaica, he was able to focus his rebelliousness. In his 60s when he settled in the Royal Mountains, Jekyll worked at untangling African influences on the colonial culture of Jamaica. He also may have been unable to compete with the "successes" of Herbert and Gertrude, which forced him, as the youngest, to etch out a completely unique career abroad. This was made possible by the income left him in his mother's will, when he was well into his 50s, an endowment that was later used to help McKay to visit England.

Jekyll found his spiritual home in Jamaica, and moved there in 1900 to study horticulture and escape English civilization. It was the beginning of his rejection of Western beliefs and his search for another form of spirituality. That search took him to African and Jamaican folktales, Buddhism, and vegetarianism. The island was his salvation. "I believe I am the only person who lives in Jamaica for pleasure," he wrote in *The Garden* on March 1, 1902, and wondered why more people had not settled in this "charming land." He later would work on *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes*, an attempt at countering the onslaught of modernity – a task he shared with his sister, Gertrude. The book would become the source text for colonial dialect and folkways. (Jekyll, as McKay has noted, was the first to document Jamaican dialect as lyrical works equivalent to "songs" and influenced the poet's perception of poems as "songs." His research is still current, used by poets, editors, and scholars in Jamaica in

¹⁴ Michael and Rosanna Toolev (ed.), *Gertrude Jekyll: Artist, Gardener, Craftsman* (Michaelmas Books, 1984), p.

describing the folkways of the island.) It was work very much in the abolition tradition (if I can venture such a bold connection), and brought the folkways of dark continent of Africa and the Diaspora closer to the heart and soul of England. ¹⁵ In Jamaica, Jekyll at last found "the real thing," as if discovering a rare exotic species of plant life. It was, instead, a sheet of verse handed to him by an ignorant boy "thirsting for knowledge" (McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920). "The Jamaican dialect has never been put into literary form," he explained, "except in my Annancy stories. Now is your chance as a native boy [to] put the Jamaican dialect into literary language." ¹⁶

Unlike the unflattering sketch of him in *Banana Bottom* as the intellectual "gentleman" Squire Gensir, Jekyll was a beloved son of Jamaica who never returned to his imperial homeland. (He chose instead to be buried in the Lucea Parish Church, which was then a part of Church of England, and known as the Parish Church of Hanover.) He lived in Jamaica for 34 years, and is remembered as a musician, gardener, philosopher, teacher and writer., who lived to the age of 80. McKay's reworking of the English "gentlemen," however, is significant for a number of reasons. As North explains: "Here the whole dichotomy between the primitive and the complex, nature and culture, the Afro-Caribbean and Europe, is demolished without so much as a blink of an eye." Asked by a tourist about the simplicity of his own life, North points out, Gensir believed "primitive living" to be

114.

¹⁵ Walter Jekyll's inscription is a poem by the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier:

*A few brief years have passed away
 Since Britain drove her million slaves
 Beneath the tropic's fiery ray:
 God willed their freedom; and to-day
 Life blooms above those island graves!*

more complex than imagined. And when Bitá wonders if other “native tunes” might have been borrowed, Gensir replies: “I don’t think it matters. Everyone borrows or steals and recreates in art. . . . I think some of our famous European fables have their origin in Africa” (McKay, *Banana Bottom*, 119, 124). The real Gensir – Walter Jekyll – North suggests, would never have encouraged such activities. Yet McKay’s training in annancy and song with Jekyll made borrowing second nature, particularly when transcribing the songs of a culture from the oral tradition (This notion of “song,” which Jekyll cultivated in McKay’s work, would need to be defended when Ogden, the editor at *Cambridge Magazine*, suspected some of McKay’s poems to be “echoes” of other writers.) As North sees it, to make a novel with Walter Jekyll as a character was “to reverse the process by which Jekyll introduced McKay to the world back in 1912.” Gensir, North explains, is a psychological composite, a “mixture of the Jekyll of 1912 and the McKay of 1932.” When McKay returns imaginatively to Jamaica, as he does throughout his career, it is “to a place irremediably marked by European culture, not as a refuge from modern civilization, which was apparently what Jekyll had been seeking” (North 122). Jekyll’s family, however, particularly Herbert, were mystified by his rejection of Englishness in preference for an ascetic life of expatriation. (McKay, who understood Jekyll’s exile, wrote on that mystification in an essay titled “The Enigmatic Expatriate”).¹⁷ At his brother’s death, Herbert remarked on the dearth of material possessions. There was nothing to carry back with Herbert to England; no examples of grandeur of a colonial presence. Jekyll, real or

¹⁰ McKay, *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, pp. 66-67.

imagined, was an enigma. Even today (as evidenced by North, et al.) such extreme renunciation is inconceivable to imagine for those of Jekyll's class and background. Even McKay was stunned at times by his bitterness. "The only thing I never liked in him was his always saying that England and Empire were going to the dogs because his class had abdicated the right to rule in favour of unscrupulous middle class politicians" (McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920).

Jekyll reveals his pleasures, however, in the numerous diaries he wrote for *The Garden* around 1900, while his sister was editor. These reflections on the beauty of the Jamaica terrain - particularly around his cottage - gives us some idea of the beauty of nature, which powerfully influenced McKay's poetry, his sense of place (what Edouard Glissant would define in *Caribbean Discourse* a "poetics of location"), and his horticultural command of imagery and detail. With the exception of his American poems, most of McKay's verse is about and through nature. With nature, McKay explores his identity, alienation, feelings of love, and loneliness. He believed that a command of nature was a mark of a creative mind, no doubt a peculiarity he acquired from Jekyll. He believed every cultured Englishman had an understanding of nature and gardening, and was dismayed to discover otherwise. In 1920, for instance, in explaining a poem, he lectured Ogden for not knowing his horticultural references. McKay took his training as a nature poet seriously, and he believed one should know the subject thoroughly. In his training with Jekyll,

¹⁷ Mentioned in North, p. 122. Also cited in Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 145-46. I have not come across any other references to "The Enigmatic Expatriate."

McKay used horticulture as a way to express hybridity and a colonial condition known as a "poetics of *dislocation*."¹⁸

"Here winter is but a name," remarked Jekyll in a column titled "In the Port Royal Mountains, Jamaica" that appeared in a March 30, 1901 issue of *The Garden*. "The temperature ranges for the most part between 70 and 80. At this elevation (2,000 feet) no house has a fireplace, and we live day and night with open windows" – an observation that would titillate English readers, who believed in the centrality of the hearth. Jekyll goes on to say that "I now propose to write of just those things which are peculiar to special times," such as the "exceeding great glory of the Poinsettia – 'six months green and six months red,' as the saying runs," of particular interest to Westerners because of its "gorgeous double" during Christmas. Interestingly Jekyll used the image of poinsettia, as McKay would, to symbolize colonial migrations, and empire's desires for the ever-elusive "the real thing."

Jekyll observes that the poinsettia's origins are cloaked "in obscurity, and it appears to be unknown in England The plant has been sent to England but appears to revert to its ordinary form. In Jamaica, the superiority of the double kind is incontestable. A young plant bearing a few sprays is a striking object, but the brilliancy of a natural

¹⁸ Expanding on Edouard Glissant's "poetics of location" (*Caribbean Discourse*, U of Virginia 1989), Peter Hitchcock sketches a Caribbean "a cartography of resistance" wherein "memory has been experience as a rupture" – what Glissant termed the Afro-Caribbean's "irruption into modernity." This *dislocation*, as Hitchcock interprets it, enables the island auality to dominate as a central esthetic trope, in which "spatial thought remains endemic to what the writer is or must become." The mastery – and irony – in McKay's work is his ability to do both. His horticulture grounding was used to express his positioning in Western society. See Peter Hitchcock, "Antillanité and the Art of Resistance," *Research in African Literatures* 27:2 (Summer 1996), pp 34-35.

specimen carrying scores of them is such that it dims the splendour of even the brightest of its neighbors." Jekyll reacted to McKay's songs in the same spirit of discovering the unique double poinsettia, whose "natural splendour" would wither and die outside of Jamaica (and why he discouraged McKay from going to America). Truly he believed that he discovered that rare island bloom – "the real thing" – and feared it to be ephemeral. In his introduction to *Songs of Jamaica*, Jekyll persisted in describing the poet as a hardy, rare specimen:

Readers of this volume will be interested to know that they here have the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood. The young poet, aged twenty-two, spent his early years in the depths of the country, and though he has now moved to the more populous neighbourhood of Kingston, his heart remains in his Clarendon hills. (Walter Jekyll, "Preface," *Song of Jamaica*, p. 9)

It was not the vibrancy of the city, but where the heart resides that mattered. For Jekyll at least, and McKay, who mastered the art form, writing of this special place was one's fate. Jekyll's garden journal entries (read by McKay years later in the author's study) would be puzzled out and devoured by the young poet yearning for a key or roadmap into empire. What were the fantasies, the neuroses, the desires, of those in power? How might the poet take this all in and write back to the "motherland – the kernel of his identity? The poem "Flame-Heart," for instance, uses the poinsettia as a central motif as a powerful reminder of home. But in McKay's hands, the poinsettia also evokes feelings of uneasiness that years of living in America and England had brought. Where is the poet's heart, after ten years in another land? Has he become insensitive to the plant's natural splendor? The uneasiness the poet feels is the slippage of identity – so wrapped up, as it is, in the natural world.

So much I have forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice,
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
I have forgot the special, startling season
Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting;
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.

I still recall the honey-fever grass,
But cannot recollect the high days when
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
I often try to think in what sweet month
The languid painted ladies used to dapple
The yellow by-road mazing from the main,
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple.
I have forgotten—strange—but quite remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.

What weeks, what months, what time of the mild year
We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days,
Even the sacred moments when we played,
All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,
At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade.
We were so happy, happy, I remember,
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.

The sudden encounter of the poinsettia on a gritty city street rekindles the poet's imagination – a world of senses of aromas, sights and sounds that have been, until now, forgotten. But the memory is also of Jekyll, and that too has become dulled. Is the uneasiness, then, of homosexual desire – or panic? But for Jekyll “a catalogue of names of plants in flower would hardly change from January to December.” In one's heart, this bloom “is the one brilliant spot of colour in a landscape of quiet green. I always rejoice in the lucky chance which placed it so happily.”¹⁹

Another poem, “Spanish Needle” which was written upon McKay's journey to England in 1920, foregrounds an early horticultural transaction that negotiated borders, cultures, and class with newer perceptions. But horticulture still held the promise, for the poet, as a creative form of transmission – the popular mode of discourse, he believed, for the colonial and colonizer. Even though McKay broke literary ground by playing the role of cultural reporter, he struggled against the very order that helped bring him fame. “Spanish Needles” revisits that dilemma ten years later. Known as “bur marigolds” or “sticktight,” Spanish needles are associated with the popular Asteraceae (asters), producing two-pronged burlike fruits (achenes) and yellow flowers. They are so common, yet capture McKay's heart, and one immediately thinks of Whitman's “Leaves of Grass.”

Lovely dainty Spanish needle
With your yellow flower and white,
Dew-bedecked and softly sleeping,
Do you think of me tonight?

¹⁹ *The Garden*, March 30, 1901, p. 223.

Shadowed by the spreading mango,
Nodding by the rippling stream,
Tell me, dear plant of my childhood,
Do you of the exile dream?

Do you see me by the brookside,
Catching crabs beneath the stone?
As you did the day you whispered:
Leave the harmless dears alone?

Do you see me in the meadow,
Coming from the woodland spring,
With a bamboo on my shoulder
And a pail slung from a string?

Do you see me all expectant,
Living in an orange grove,
While the sweetsweets sing above me,
Waiting for my elf-eyed love?

Lovely dainty Spanish needle,
Source to me of sweet delight,
In your far-off sunny southland
Do you dream of me to-night?

Both plant and person are in a transaction that involves migration and adaptation it seems, which might explain his use of the hearty Spanish needle: “do you of the exile dream?” Why such honor for a tropical plant that is a common variety of weed, growing along brooks and fields? Yet Spanish needles over time have adapted to North America and elsewhere— and its durability evokes the author’s own complicated unsettledness. Is there hope, McKay insinuates, in the natural migration of the bur marigold? Likewise, McKay has used the image of fruit to evoke a similar uneasiness, especially since McKay traveled to America in 1912 on a United Fruit Company passenger-cargo ship. In “Tropics in New York” begins with a young colonial’s vision in a New York shop window, and returns us to Herbert’s imperial gaze, but reverses it. The colonial is now in the frame. But what does he see? As North suggests,

There is a special irony in the situation of the transplanted
Jamaican staring at the fruit imported from his homeland and
carefully displayed behind glass. What was common at home, and

commonly available, becomes a rare delicacy, not the recipient of prizes but the prize itself.

In the poem, “the particular language of the colony” – one’s relationship to nature, for instance, to use North’s description – come up against “the generalized language of empire.” For McKay produce and person are interchangeable world commodities, much as poinsettias are confused for the real thing: “the cargo assimilated as an exotic treat, the passenger cut off from both tropics and New York,” is how North describes the feeling (112). What, one wonders, are the “old familiar ways” that McKay hungers for as he gazes into a New York shop window? Does his “Englishness” add to the strain of the colonial now transplanted to America, where he is continually reminded of “his place” as well as his obligation to “his race” – and clashing against all that he has learned?

Those questions are echoes in “Spanish Needle,” which concern locale and a tense romanticism. Though written nearly ten years after leaving Jamaica, the focus and sensibility is still on geography and botany – hard learning to undo. Like other works that became part of *New Hampshire and Other Poems*, which was published in 1920, “Spanish Needle” syncretizes the old and new discourses. The reference in the poem to “Southland” does not pertain to the racialized nightmare of America’s South, but to a sensibility and place to which Frederick Douglass spoke. It is not mother Africa, or a fixed diasporic space, but a “Southland” forged in hybridity and migration. Much like “Tropics in New York,” plants and bodies are cargo in a *cultural* exchange, and neither metropole nor race disrupt McKay’s balance where old forms of discourse flow into the new.

IN A MARCH 27, 1912 REVIEW, the English *Christian Commonwealth* touted McKay as "the new poet" of Jamaica – possibly of the Commonwealth, the article implied. His "songs" – humorous and pathetic – uncovered "the joys and sorrows of the peasant's lot and the writer's own humanitarian sympathies." But it was McKay's unflattering views of the New Theology that disturbed the reviewer's sense of pride, a minister by the name of W. Marwick. He hoped that the uppity colonial would "correct his rather crude views of the teachings of the City Temple pulpit, and of the value of rationalism." Nevertheless, McKay was praised as "the Burns of Jamaica," an appellation that continued in later appraisals – and the literary hope of a bungled empire.²⁰ McKay continued the charade, using dialect – which was in vogue – to parody "Old England" and the hypocrisy of the so-called "New Theology" movement, which was nothing more than old-school missionary practice with a liberal bend. Apparently he was sought out as a model colonial for these ideologues of New Theology, and a representative of the popular vernacular – the creole and hybridized cultures of the Caribbean. His function as one of the first black public intellectuals was as a decoder of the empire, explaining to the English what they need to know about their limitations. The literary routes to England, for McKay at least, were through Jekyll's class and avocations – philosophy, religion, gardening. McKay's early audiences were Botanical Garden tea gatherings and religious lecture hall crowds. Thus, the reception to his work was along spiritual-horticultural and not literary interests.

I'd go to de City Temple, where de old fait' is a wreck
An' de parson is a-preachin views dat most folks will not tek;
I'd go where de men of sience meet togeder in deir hall.
To give light to de real truths, to obey King Reason's call.²¹

McKay's training into the ways of empire began in 1907. That is when he met Jekyll, the English intellectual who was completing his research on *Jamaica Song and Story*,

²⁰ Marwick, *Christian Commonwealth*, March 27, 1912.

which took him along the coast and interior. He had read much literature on his own, but the encounter with an actual english gentleman, and writer, was inspiring. "You can't image what it meant," McKay commented years later, "'to meet such a man like that" (McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920). Jekyll, at his age, was more of a grandfather to McKay's blossoming 17-year-old adolescence. There were homoerotic nuances, but McKay admits to never being patronized. It was, for all concerned, a discreet tension, held together by rebelliousness and a love of language. McKay would understand that, and inscribe many of his poems - particularly those written when he was a constable - as love messages to enflame Jekyll's passion or jealousy. The Clarendon Hills, where McKay grew up, was "in a mountain country of a few hundred villages widely scattered over the hills." Jekyll, a lapsed minister by this time, when he visited the village, may have engaged the local missionaries, the Hathaways, in conversations over colonial issues. The Hathaways however seemed more interested, McKay noted, in converting the natives to Shakespeare than to religion. (The Hathaways also found themselves in *Banana Bottom*, portrayed as earnest missionaries who acculturate the novel's main character, Bitá, into the ways and traditions of empire (a thinly disguised veil for McKay's feminized alterego, so some have noted). McKay once remarked how the playwright Bernard Shaw had "conquered England with his play," and believed that was how empire worked. To conquer empire, one must be a poet who can get at the soul of that power. In similar ways, the Hathaways applied that logic to seduce the peasants - or those, like McKay, looking for a way into English culture - with Elizabethan

²¹ "Old England," in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912).

dramas. ²² (Some time later, the editor Frank Harris remarked how McKay was first attracted to Shakespeare's plays and not poetry. "It was the story in the plays that had carried me through Shakespeare," McKay noted.) ²³ The poet's brother, Uriah Theodore, was also touched by the Hathaways's literary fixation on Shakespeare, and "gave him his first complete set of Shakespeare," which the younger McKay devoured. In the Hathaways' care, and later with Uriah Theodore at Montego Bay, McKay read Dickens and a number of women romance writers, such as Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlotte M. Braeme, Southworth, and Marie Corelli. He devoured the Waverly novels, "my first reading of anything that was thrilling just for the thrill," he later recalled in his autobiography. ²⁴ Dickens' influence is evident in "Hard Times," a person poem written in 1909 about a poor peasant – "my first attempt," the 19-year-old McKay explained modestly when asked about his work, "being a little thing" (*Gleaner* October 7, 1911). Written in dialect – probably at Jekyll's insistence – the poem is a discourse on a working peasant's plight, and Jekyll would annotate the poem two years later when it appeared in *Songs of Jamaica*. In a letter to Ogden (March 12, 1920), McKay explained that he began writing poetry in 1905, when he was 15, which indeed would class him as an infant prodigy. (But for whatever reason, in that same letter he also dated the publication of *Songs of Jamaica* two years earlier.)

De mo' me wuk, de mo' time hard,
 I don't know what fe do;
 I ben' me knee an' pray to Ghad,
 Yet t'ings same as befo'.

²² McKay, "How Black Sees Green and Red," *Liberator*, June 1921, pp. 17, 20-21. Also see Wayne Cooper's *The Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 61.

²³ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

De taxes knockin' at me door,
I hear de bailiff's v'ice;
Me wife is sick, can't get no cure,
But gnawin' me like mice.

De picknies hab to go to school
Widout a bite fe taste;
And I am wokring like a mule,
While buccra sittin' in de cool,
Hab 'nuff nenvam fe waste.

De clodes is tearin' off dem back
When money seems noa mek;
A man can't eben ketch a mac,
Care how him 'train him neck.

De peas won't pop, de corn can't grow,
Poor people face look sad;
Dat Gahd would cuss de lan' I'd know,
For black naygur too bad.

I won't gib up, I won't sav die,
For all de time is hard;

Aldough de wul' soon en', I'll trv

Mv wutless best as time goes by,
An' trust on in my Gahd.

McKay's "dialect" conveys a peasant's point of view, a style of "reportage" found in "Way 'o the Peasant," which appeared in the *Daily Gleaner*, the newspaper of Kingston, in 1913. If one strips away this covering of the dialect, one can see the kernel of oppression, anger, and revolt that coalesces later in such protest poems as "If We Must Die." Interesting, if we get beyond the sing-songiness of the dialect, the peasant in "Hard Times" is more defiant. "I won't gib up, I won't say die" – a more assertive stance than the ambivalence of "If We Must Die."

Although his encounters with Jekyll and Olivier were unique, McKay had English teachers throughout his school years, instead of English-educated colonials, which reveals some of the prejudices and concerns of McKay's family (McKay portrayed just such an educated colonial in *Banana Bottom*, who flees Jamaican after he is rumored to have

copulated with a goat.) As he was educated to believe, London was the world's "metropolis." His first teacher was James Hill and then a Mr. Watts (who may have been associated with the Rationalist Society in Jamaica). At the age of 12, he studied with Uriah Theodore, who opened his Shakespeare library to him and probably encouraged a healthy skepticism as well, offering the "romance of science" in such works as Huxley's *Man's Place in the Universe* and Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*.

By the time he met Jekyll "in the bush" – although it was Brown Town where they met, while McKay was apprenticed as a wheelwright – the poet was already erudite. Jekyll's reputation followed him – known as "this man who had gone among the peasants and collected their field-and-yard songs (words and music) and African folk tales" – and, no doubt, McKay sought him out (ALWFH 13). At first, Jekyll viewed the young poet as "merely a literate phenomena among the illiterate peasants whose songs and tales he was writing." Soon, however, he saw McKay as "the articulate consciousness of the peasants," and those crude experiments in dialect verse became, for Jekyll, real poetry – and McKay, "the real thing."

McKay visited Jekyll frequently over the next five years. He wrote "songs" about the peasant life, which Jekyll edited. More importantly, McKay began reading *poetry* from the vast library of Jekyll's mountaintop retreat (one may ponder the task of carting up those volumes, more than likely upon a coolie's back – just an imperial moment – to bring literature to the jungle). McKay read *Childe Harold*, *The Dunciad*, *Essay on Man*, *Paradise Lost*, Elizabethan lyrics, *Leaves of Grass*, the lyrics of Shelley and Keats, and late Victorian poets. There were also the books and articles Jekyll himself wrote: *The Garden diaries* and *The*

Bible Untrustworthy. With these works in one's lap and the views of the countryside, McKay was indeed in literary paradise – an image that he carried with him throughout his life. Jekyll had arrived in Jamaica with a mastery of languages – German, Latin, Italian, French – and translated Schopenhauer and Spinoza as well as Dante, Leopardi, Goethe, Vilion, and Baudelaire. In Jekyll's den, McKay also read the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, who was published by the Rationalist Press of London, in six-penny reprints, works by George Eliot (the infatuation with Eliot, McKay surmised, may have been due to Jekyll's close relationship with the family in England), and Matthew Arnold, who was a continual inspiration throughout his life, particularly when the poet converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1940s. Impressed by Jekyll's lifestyle high on a mountaintop, McKay paid tribute to Jekyll by romanticizing his hermitage. Titled "The Hermit," the poem, in dialect and persona, evokes an island-tempered "Ruined Cottage." One also recalls the idyllic hermitage in Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*.

Far in de country let me hide myself
 From life's sad pleasures an' de greed of self,
 Dwellin' wid Nature primitive an' rude,
 Livin' a peaceful life of solitude.

Dere by de woodland let me build my home
 Where tropic roses ever are in bloom,
 An' t'rough de wild cane growin' thick and tall
 Rushes in gleeful mood de waterfall.

Roof trong enough to keep out season rain,
 Under whose eaves loved swallows will be fain
 To build deir nests, an deir young birdlings rear
 Widouten have de least lee t'ought of fear.

An' in my study I shall view de wul',
 An' learn of all its doin's to de full'
 List to de woodland creatures' music sweet –
 Sad, yet contended in my lonely retreat.

We hear echoes of a sadder but wiser mariner, and wonder if Jekyll's island retreat speaks to the mariner's anguished knowledge of transgression or his own colonial isolation. As he remarked to *Daily Gleaner* readers on December 14, 1912, a few months after McKay left for America: "It is the fashion to dwell on the pleasures of youth, and reference is seldom made to its disappointments, yet they are what chiefly live in my memory." Jekyll's view of "de wul" was high indeed and getting there was treacherous. His "hermitage" was at the entrance to a defile, or gorge. "It is 2,000 feet over sea level," Jekyll remarked in his journal on August 18, 1900. On the easterly side, "a narrow strip of garden edges a precipice which falls to the busy, rushing, roaring little river 200 feet below," he explained, and from his house "the ground falls in three directions and rises steeply on the fourth." The westerly side, Jekyll noted, gave the impression of "the possibility of a path" that was "roughly paved" to withstand wash of rain. "It is difficult to convey an idea of the steepness of the land to anyone unacquainted with the country. Perhaps some notion may be afforded by the fact that, though it is quite a short walk from the top of the garden to the bottom, the descent in perpendicular higher exceeds 150 feet."²⁵

"The Hermit" seems like one of those "serious poems" that Jekyll might have found troubling, especially for such a self-effacing person. Jekyll's notes to the poem, however, make no literary references, either real or imagined, to Wordsworth or any other English tradition. But there are numerous botanical references as well as comments on the peculiarities of the climate and culture. Jekyll, unlike Eastman, was not a self-professed

²⁵ "A Jamaica Garden," *The Garden*, August 18, 1900; p. 125.

litterateur. He was, as McKay later pointed out, a scholar, who showed the eighteen-year-old poet a “new world in literature.” In real life, Jekyll was far from sad in his hermitage. A vegetarian and Buddhist, he seemed to find harmony and balance, despite what some critics have called his “lonely self-exile” (Wayne Cooper, *Sojourner* 32).

McKay knew that he could not afford to live a hermit's life, to pursue a purely esthetic lifestyle of solitude and peace of mind like Jekyll. Yet he later he became one of the first black public intellectuals to making a living at his writing, a desire that seemed to have been inspired by his mentor's solitary existence. Although his family and relatives were farmers, according to Winston James, they had become quite prosperous over time (his brother, Uriah Theodore, was a teacher but also brokered in bananas). ²⁶ McKay was expected to follow in that line, or at least pursue a trade, and his family apprenticed him at an early age. Unsited for manual labor, McKay moved to Kingston (an attempted, some say, to get away from family and closer to Jekyll – but more likely it was an infatuation with a policeman), where he enlisted with the constabulary force. The “underlying cause” for joining the police force, he admitted in 1911, was a “pitiable love story,” and the reason for leaving may have been a broken heart. But Jekyll was helpful there, too, in untangling the affair by persuading Olivier to excuse McKay from the force. A number of poems in *Constab Ballads*, which appeared the same year as *Songs of Jamaica*, deal with a close and tender relationship with a fellow officer. But publicly McKay was discreet: “I cannot touch

²⁶ See Winston, James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London: Verso, 2000). James' focus on the family business is an attempt to dispel any illusions that McKay was a poor peasant, an image the poet might have encouraged for political reasons.

the audience with my heart. It would be of no interest to them.”²⁷ In the preface to the poems, McKay wrote: “Let me confess at once. I had not the stuff that goes to the making of a good constable; for I am so constituted that imagination outruns discretion, and it is my misfortune to have a most improper sympathy with wrongdoers.” Nevertheless, McKay did not regret his experiences. “If I had enemies whom I hated, I also had close friends whom I loved.”

In Brown Town, McKay showed Jekyll his “serious” poems, all written in straight English, which Jekyll found “repetitious.” Jekyll mulled a bit and then pointed to the persona poems – the dialect verse, which were written in creole (such as “Cotch Donkey,” later published in *Constab Ballads*) and exclaimed jubilantly that this was “the real thing.”²⁸ At Jekyll’s request, McKay included personal reports on the culture and landscape of Jamaica, a world that would be of interest to those in “Old England” where dialect was seen as a titillating diversion. These persona poems, in dialect, were “not an easy task,” McKay later admitted.

The trouble was that only the West Indians could read the dialect and that quite badly too. Besides the masses were too poor to buy books. English people and coloured Americans were too lazy to take the trouble to read the dialect. And some of the lazy critics said some of the most silly things about that which they never tried to read and understand.

²⁷ *Daily Gleaner*, October 7, 1911, p. 7.

²⁸ Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, p. 27; McKay, *My Green Hills*, p. 66. There is some debate on what constituted “the real thing.” Michael North, for instance, in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) interprets the “real thing” to mean an authentic dialect. That was not Jekyll’s intention, I believe. The “real thing” did not mean literary excellence, in the strict sense. McKay later explained that Jekyll encouraged him to write “in any rhythm that came naturally to me,” and did not emphasize one poetic form – or standard of excellence. McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready.

Dialect was simply too limited. The poet wanted “a fighting chance to write things” that could be read easily. Even in Jamaica, McKay noted, it was the native talk of the villages and to a lesser degree of the town, and it was difficult to produce, McKay admitted, a fact overlooked by readers, who viewed it as a natural form of expression. “I had to abide by certain rules of syntax and grammar in writing which are unnecessary in native talk,” he explained. So he found gratification in reading German and French, with the help of Jekyll: Goethe, Shiller, and Heine, were read in the original interspersed with Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Victor Hugo.

This contradicts his published accounts. In *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, McKay admitted that dialect was “easier to write than poems in straight English,” and one wonders if this was a public boast. In revealing his deep anxieties to Ogden, in the above quote, gives us the impression that he was compelled to write in dialect. “I had the consolation,” he explained to Ogden, “of having done my share of helping to preserve the dialect in written form.”²⁹ These oral stories – some of them passed down through generations – which chronicled the lives of the draymen, the sugar mill workers, and the peasants – McKay felt obliged to preserve (MGH 67).

SONGS OF JAMAICA WAS REVIEWED THROUGHOUT THE COLONIES, with notices appearing in London and Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin and Cardiff, Melbourne, Sydney and Auckland, Sierra Leone, Lagos, and Capetown, South Africa – the circumference of the British Empire (*A Long Way from Home* 16). Even though McKay had doubts about the appeal of dialect, the work was taken up as a model of a new type of colonial sensibility. As the *Gleaner*, the daily newspaper of Kingston, Jamaica, boasted: “we have genuine poetry here” – meaning in McKay’s work but also *here* in the colonies, Jamaica. McKay’s work offered “a rhyming glimpse into an unknown world” and was seen as “Kiplingesque,” but written in the “quaint vernacular of the negroes.” McKay probably relished the Kiplingesque comparison, but not the associations with “quaint” rhythms, which only made him more determined to discard dialect.³⁰

The most enthusiastic responses to McKay’s *Songs of Jamaica* appeared in horticulture magazines in England, which the *Daily Gleaner* proudly reproduced in its pages. *The Gleaner* anticipated McKay’s English reception by running an interview in a October 7, 1911, issue. A full page was devoted to McKay’s forthcoming book, including a photograph of the author dressed as a constable (the same one used as the frontispiece to *Songs of Jamaica*). The newspaper article, written by W.A. Stevenson, was celebratory, with a banner headline and a four-deck subheading, which stated in part: “The Governor Appreciates Talent of Writer.” It was a plum for the governor that the book would have a dual publication, in London and Kingston. Stevenson set the tone for all subsequent

²⁹ McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready.

³⁰ *Westminster Review* (November 1912), qtd. in *Daily Gleaner*, December 10, 1912.

reviews in England and elsewhere. He characterized McKay "an infant prodigy" and "a marvel," who attracted large audiences whenever he appeared "in the country." In discussing the poems, Stevenson noted: There is a charming naiveté in the love poems, and humour, and pathos: rollicking fun, too, when he lets himself go. His versatility is wonderful." Stevenson considered McKay at his best in his "delicate love songs." Walter Jekyll, who would edit and annotate the collection, confirmed the analysis: The "love songs," he admits, are "charming in their simplicity."

A formal review appeared in *The Gleaner* three months later (January 8, 1912), and predicted that the book and author would "become household words throughout the island." Here, too, the review was laudatory: "We hardly know which most to admire, the sentiments of this young man – he is but 22 – or the skill with which he puts them into verse." The reviewer again singled out the "love-songs," which have "a cachet [sic] of its own." The anonymous reviewer (one wonders if Jekyll, with his ear for the lyrical song, was behind it) focused on the musical quality of the poems, rather than their poetic or political content, and found humor in such poems as "Cudjoe Fresh from de Lecture."³¹ The book has "something for everybody, and we are confident that these poems will be recorded and sung all over Jamaica." On a more serious issue, the reviewer advised to those working on the Panama Canal in need of homeland reading: "To our countrymen on the Isthmus and in Costa Rica they [the poems] should be especially acceptable as in reading these pages,

³¹ Cf. Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1994) and his discussion of dialect in "Quashie to Buccra: The Linguistic Expatriation of Claude McKay." Quashie and Cudjoe, two personas in McKay's early poems, have interested later scholars as early figures of colonial resistance.

they will feel once more in their old home." (As had been the case throughout his life. McKay's work was borrowed for national and racial causes. Later, after he became an internationalist, he found such abuse abhorrent.)

A more thoughtful piece appeared in the *Jamaica Times*.¹² Thomas H. MacDermot, himself a noted poet, remarked that McKay had a rich poetic voice and was "destined . . . to yield a great deal more of work as excellent as this." He concluded: "as a whole, and especially of the great majority of the poems, we have here outstanding merit."

The *Literary Guide* (January 1, 1912,) a journal connected with the Rationalist Press Association (to which Jekyll belonged), noted of *Songs of Jamaica*: "The volume gives a delightful presentation of the thoughts and feelings of a black man, which in all essential points will be found precisely like our own." The journal also found that McKay had "a genuine poetic gift and a beautiful ear for rhythm," and (in an oblique compliment to Jekyll's musical notations) praised the six "tunes" in the appendix as "particularly noteworthy."

Dialect, itself, though abhorred by the poet, has come around. Michael North, for instance, views it as central to modernist expression. And Michael Stoff sees *Songs of Jamaica* not simply as a work of dialect but a finely crafted persona that projected an authentic "Jamaican folk culture," and captures "the exotic and early qualities of the black peasantry with a lyrical sensitivity reminiscent of Robert Burns." ¹³ Geta J. LeSeur notes that McKay devised a "Jamaican Scottish dialect," using Burns as his model. She was more

¹² Quoted in *Rebel Sojourner*, pages 49-50. The review appeared in the January 13, 1912, issue.

colloquial in claiming McKay as a "Jamaica's Bobbie Burns."³³ Interesting these associations may all relate to McKay's epigraph to the poem "Rise and Fall," which he prefaces by saying: "Thoughts of Burns – with apologies to his immortal spirit for making him Speak in Jamaican dialect." (The English poet in McKay is clearly rebuking Jekyll for his dogged insistence on "dialect.") Yet there is a bit of irony and humor to McKay's note, an insider comment between two "subject" poets who wrote in dialect.

Dev read 'em again an' again,
 n' laugh an' cry at 'em in turn;
 I felt I was getting' quite vain,
 But dere was a lesson te learn.

Mv povertv quicklv took wing,
 Of life no experience had I;
 I couldn' then want anv'ting
 Dat kindness or money could buy.

Dev tek me away from me lan',
 De gav o' de wul' to behold,
 An' roam me t'rough palaces gran',
 An show'red on me honour untold.

I went to de ballroom at night,
 An' danced wid de belles of de hour;
 Half dazed bv de glitterin' light,
 I lounged in de palm-covered bower.

I flirted wid beautiful girls,
 An' drank de wine flowin' red;
 I felt mv brain movin' in whirls,
 An' knew I was losin' mv head.

But soon I was tired of it all,
 Mv spirit was weary to roam;
 De life grew as bitter as gall,
 I hungered again for my home.

Te-day I am back in me lan',
 Forgotten bv all de gay throng,
 A poorer but far wiser man,
 An' knowin' de right from de wrong.

³³ *Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 127.

³⁴ "Claude McKay's Romanticism," in *CLA Journal* 32:3 (March 1989): 296-308.

Eugenia Collier has noted that "Rise and Fall" and other poems that invert English traditions, point toward a new direction in Black English literary studies - which for McKay occurred in his meeting with C.K. Ogden and the Cambridge School in 1920. She sees McKay's poems as springing "directly from the Black folk," much as Robert Burns' reflects the Scottish countryside, a view shared by Jean Wagner, who differentiates McKay's dialect from Afro-American attempts. She found McKay more "rooted in the soil," unlike "the Dunbar school" in America, which maintained "the stereotype of black inferiority." Collier also noted that McKay's poems were remarkable for their time because England was the cultural standard; dialect was considered vulgar. Yet, as I noted, McKay had deep ambivalence about dialect.

THE PLACE TO LOOK FOR THE POET, then, particularly in these early poems, without influences, personas, or reportage, is in "A Dream," one of the few poems to endure Jekyll's insistence on dialect and "natural" rhythm (another is "Sukee River," which will be discussed later). The poem works within the "dream" tradition of Afro-American-Caribbean writing, but shows how a complex poet such as Claude McKay uniquely hybridized English (and later American) literary traditions. Much like the sardonic aside to Robert Burns, "A Dream" steps outside of its conventions - the ballad form, for instance - in ways that add literary and racial depth, and which provides skillful navigation - thematically, linguistically, geographically - through an otherwise flat, politicized landscape of blackness that was perpetuated by Jekyll and others of the dominant culture who mentored McKay.

I leave my home again, wandr'ing afar,
But goes with me her true, her gentle heart,
Ever to be my hope, my guiding star,
And whisperings of comfort to impart.

Methinks we're strolling by the woodland stream,
And my fame thrills with joy to hear her sing;
But, O my God! 'tis all – 'tis all a dream;
This is the end, the rude awakening.

This is the last of three sections in "A Dream." Written in traditional crossed rhyme ballad, beautifully reminiscent of the style of Burns, the first and third lines are tetrameter and the second and fourth are trimeter. "A Dream" differs in that it is written in a *slight* Jamaican dialect – hence the apologies to Burns et al. Elsewhere. The poem chronicles a day in the life of a village child, and shows McKay working his own voice – somewhere between folk and high culture that is representative of the first Caribbean dialect attempts. The child (possibly the poet; possibly idealized "youth") awakens to the sound of "the wesly horn," an early Island version of a community bell, and as has been the habit throughout Jamaican history (a tradition enriched by Rastafarian culture) kneels to "utter praise to the Unseen." Sights, sounds, and smells of Island life arouse the youth (and also us) – the aroma of freshly cut cane juice mingles with "sleeping majoes," "bamboo groves," and "shiny star-apples." This is an idyllic pastoral world, filled with rich textures of the land and of the nearby ocean. Yet while others rise to work to this "sweetly" sound of the "wesly horn," our young narrator skips over "fire-burnt soil," glancing at his father's "honest toil," a figure in the fields that stands as a stark monument to peasant endurance. The youth instead of worshipping a monument to colonial toil, follows instead a "winding foot path" through the woodlands to a brooklet, where bucktoes and small crawfish are at play, no doubt Jekyll's cottage enclosed by nature, yet also the perpetrator of his father's toil. He wonders, fleetingly, of his father's life of toil, but that thought is soon jarred by the larger, more omniscient "tropic music," which is "dear to great and small": the joyous outburst of a nightingale. (And it's the nightingale, for this poet, that has significance as a Romantic metaphor of timeless art and beauty.) In the background is his father's toiling figure, and the poet wonders, wide-eyed, how he can endure "the sun's fierce heat." McKay utilizes the rustic ballad and the sophisticated persona of the Romantic to envelop an Island yearning

(and discussion of oppression), which moves from the traditions of England to the rich flora of a new world. In the next movement, the youth is older and more mournful: "Gone now those happy days when all was blest," he laments.

For I have left my home and kindred dear ;
In a strange place I am a stranger's guest,
The pains, the real in life, I've now to bear.

No more again I'll idle at my will,
Running the mongoose down upon the lea ;
No more I'll jostle Monty up the hill,
To pick the cashews off the laden tree.

I feel the sweetness of those days again,
And hate, so hate, on the past scenes to look ;
All night in dreaming comes the awful pain,
All day I groan beneath the iron yoke.

In mercy then, ye Gods, deal me swift death !
Ah ! you refuse, and life instead you give ;
You keep me here and still prolong my breath,
That I may suffer all the days I live.

Much like McKay, our youth has left his home and "kindred dear" to become a "stranger's guest," in a strange place. He now groans "beneath the iron yoke" of work, which opposes our youth's pastoral ideal. What pain, what anguish, does the youth now feel; so terrible that he pleads with God to "deal me a swift death"? (a fate that Dunbar, with equal anguish, expresses his "Sympathy"). The solution is to return to his youthful Island, but *only* in poetic imagination. While "wand'ring afar," he holds this allegory, this "guiding star," close to his heart. For the poem, as well as the poet caught between English poetic traditions and new-world realities, this is truly "the end, the rude awakening."

"A Dream" is important as a frame for the Caribbean pastoral – one that is situated in those severe landscapes atop Jekyll's retreat, where earth precipitously meets sea. As a colonial, McKay interweaves English literary traditions with an Island sensibility, whether Medieval "greenish" fires, Spenserian fairies, or Keatsian nightingales. The "uneasiness" of the poem – and of the poet's "rude awakening" – occurs when these idealized forms, or traditions, clash with the realities he sees around him, particularly the looming figure of his

father, who towers as that "solitary reaper" – so static and monumental. McKay *sees* his subjectivity. The crawfish, metaphorically, become our new shepherd's guide. The impending doom for our youthful shepherd is the connection to larger worlds, the realization that no man – or people – can comprise an island. This is the moment, intellectually, where the Island pastoral ruptures for the poet (possibly upon his move from the countryside to the city of Kingston). "A Dream" represents the exiled colonial's longings, much as Dunbar "caged bird" expresses African American futility – and both work within and against a tradition of resistance and accommodation. Consequently McKay, on the surface, provides us with a well-crafted exercise in rustic sensibilities, prancing along the hillsides in love with his "darling Idalee." But on a deeper level, this rustic countryside, with faint echoes of the English pastoral (now reconfigured as the "Imperial dictum") is subverted by a guide who is herself clad in white. If we did not know the colonial situation in Jamaica (a few months after Olivier's term as governor ended, there would be massive strikes and riots), would this description matter – white and black being fairly common metaphors for evoking a literary sensibility? Since this poem is also cloaked in the colonial rhetoric of self-determination, we can assume – even in 1910 – that McKay's allusion to a white-clad guide has inferences peculiar and unique to Caribbean colonial life. Or does it?

Whatever the political allusion, however, the central moment for the child/poet is his encounter with a female guide who just *happens* to be clad in white (images of women in "white" uniforms marching upon the capitals of all the Western nations, was one familiar to McKay). Associations with feminism, suffrage, abolition – even the white-clad Garveyite marchers – are tempting and, in McKay's experiences in America and later in England would be quite accurate. For McKay's poetic career coincides with the rise of international feminism and although Jamaica was far from a hotbed of feminist activity, reports from around the world filtered into the country. In America McKay would align

himself with some of the most politically powerful women through the Heterodoxy Club, such as Crystal Eastman, Rose Pastor Stokes, Louise Bryant, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; and in England, pacifist-feminists such as George Bernard Shaw, C.K. Ogden, and, of course, Sylvia Pankhurst.

Those connections were natural and easy. The ever-present image of the English metropolis, in which the far and wide is always touched by the "Motherland" would exert tremendous pull on McKay, as a colonial subject schooled in English ways and traditions. "In those days," the poet remarked, "Queen Victoria with her veil and sceptre in her hand upon the schoolroom appeared to us as an imposing white mother, more important to Heaven and Earth and God than the Virgin Mary."¹⁵

¹⁵ "Up To Date," pp. 1-2. Harry Ransom.

4

Gertrude Jekyll and the Commonwealth Garden

Every human organisation has somewhere a limit of possible expansion, and it is plain to see that in the undue growth of a densely populated area so vast as that of this immense city, many of its related groups of inhabitants swell into unmanageable masses that have lost all useful proportion to each other.¹

AT HOME IN THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE, WHILE ADVENTURING IMPERIALISTS were plumbing the globe for colonial riches, English gardening took on a diasporic texture and sensibility that reflected a larger world of North Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean. Horticulture, which came of age in the late nineteenth century, was a major route of transaction between colonizer and colonial, and became a way for peripheral activities, such as poetry and music, to reach a larger audience. English gardening examples, for instance, were exported to the Caribbean at the same time that plant specimens and native folklore were finding their way into England. Over time, with this vigorous exchange between the colonies and England that involved native species and crossbreeding, English values and tastes began to change.

One example of the fruits of this exchange – no pun intended – can be found in Claude McKay's poetry, which reflected horticulture's newfound popularity, and the

¹ "A Garden City," *The Garden*, January 6, 1900.

interest in cross-breeding, colonial cottage gardening, and cultivating hardy species. The arrival of McKay's poems in January 1912 and the reception the book sparked – was much like a far-flung correspondent for *The Garden* discovering a rare species in the Nileless desert of Khartum. Late- nineteenth century gardening reflected the beginnings of this imperial exchange, and horticulturists, such as Gertrude Jekyll, would have had a botanical curiosity – if not a fascination – with such McKay poems as “Me Bannabees,” which was so dense in horticultural allusions that it needed to be translated for English readers by Jekyll's brother Walter. The title, in Jamaican dialect, means “my climbing bean or peas.”

Run ober mango trees,
'Preach chock to kitchen doo,'
Watch de blue bannabees,
Look how it ben' down low!

De blossom draw de bees
Same how de soup draw man;
Some call it “broke-pot” peas,
It caan' bruk we bu'n'pan.

Wha' sweet so when it t'ick'
Though some call it goat-tud,
Me all me tinger lick,
An' vet no chew me cud.

A mumma plant de root
Oe dav jes' out o' fun;
But now look 'pon de fruit,
see wha' de “mek fun” done.

I jam de 'tick dem 'traight
Soon as it 'tart fe 'preach,
An begin count de date
Fe when de pod fe shed.

Me watch de vine dem grow,
S'er t'row dung a de root:
Crop time look fe me slow,
De bud tek long fe shoot.

But so de day did come,
I 'crub de bu-n-pan bright,
An' tu'n down 'pon it trom
De mamin' till de night.

An' Lard! Me belly swell,
No cause de peas no good,
But me be'n tek a 'pell
Mo' dan a gaint would.

Yet eben atter dat
Me nvam it wid a will,
"Causen it mek me fat;
So I wi' lub it still.

Caan' talk about gungu,
Fe me it is no peaces;
Cockstone might do fe vou
Me want me bannabees.

Songs of Jamaica, and this poem in particular, act as an ethnographic report in the disguise of dialect poetry, an art form whose popularity and credibility as a vehicle for serious poetic expression would soon erode. The "vernacular," common plant names such as "Bannabees," "Goat-tud" (a poisonous plant that resembles the "bannabees"), "Gungu" (Congo peas, brought on slave ships from Africa), and "Cockstone," red peas from North America, were a rich source of authentic folk information, coming from what Walter Jekyll verified as "the real thing." But it was neither race nor the poetic expression that was celebrated; but the details of colonial gardening, and its adaptations to African (the slave trade) and English influences. For Garden readers it was breathtaking to see the proximity and interconnectedness of these migratory and native plants compactly arranged into a 50-page book. McKay, a skilled poet, was able to transmit detailed, botanical and ethnographic information in almost every poem. He did have a scrupulous teacher, Gertrude's brother

Walter. McKay revealed that sought-after folk wisdom of a successful garden (what is now referred to as the science of sustainable agriculture) in large part based on the old ways.²

Gertrude Jekyll's interest in folklore and dialect is also important here, because she is the other end of an ethnographic and colonial map that links her to Walter's discovery and promotion of native poetry in Jamaica. In 1904 she had published *Old West Surrey: Some Notes and Memories*, and chronicled the vanishing rustic culture of West Surrey, near London, and what has become known as English cottage gardening, then coming under assault from modernist architecture and design.

It is sad to think that, within a few years, death will have claimed the few yet living of the old people who retain the speech and manner of the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Born and brought up in remote and quiet country villages and hamlets, many of them can neither read nor write, and I have met with some who have never been ten miles away from their birthplace. But they are by no means among the dull ones of the earth; indeed, their simple wisdom and shrewdness are in many ways quite equal to those of their brethen in the wider world." (218)

Gertrude Jekyll's ideas about gardening, then, have deeper significance beyond her credentials as a horticulturist. Like her brother Walter, she had all the prejudices and privileges of the upper class, but rebelled against the conformity of the age. *Old West Surrey* attempted a cultural excavation of a geography, very much as Waldo Frank

² Walter Jekyll may have had more of a hand in "standardizing" the dialect in McKay's horticultural poems, such as those that appeared in *Songs of Jamaica*. He edited the book, explained the dialect in detail in his preface, and provided a glossary of terms. He liberally "translated" dialect, in much the same manner as he "translated," for McKay's reading pleasure, poems and passages of Greek, German and Romantic writers (McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920, William Ready Collection). In a sense McKay's two dialect books – *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, published in 1912 – were more collaborations in which Jekyll, who was already at work classifying Jamaica's native and naturalized flora, *systematized* McKay's use of Jamaican dialect, much as Ogden would later use McKay as a model of Basic English and an early form of linguistic decolonization. McKay represented everything they wanted to believe about their literary projects.

attempted to do in *Our America*, which appeared around the same time. Both celebrated an indigenous folk esthetic. In the preface to *Old West Surrey*, Jekyll noted that,

Formally, within a mile or two of one's home, it was a rare thing to see a stranger, and people's lives went leisurely. Now, the strain and throng and unceasing restlessness that have been induced by all kinds of competition, and by ease of communication, have invaded this quiet corner of the land. In the older days, London might have been at a distance of two hundred miles. Now one never can forget that it is little more than an hour's journey." (viii)

She laments the "modern exchange" of those "common things of daily use" with "cheap pretentious articles, got up with veneer and varnish and shoddy material," and she devoted chapters to "Cottages and Farms," "Home Industries," and "Tools and Rural Industrial" (viii). Fully three-quarters of the book detailed the folkways - clothing, speech, occupations - of a vanishing culture, while only one chapter was devoted to cottage gardens. Jekyll's "old country" was a day's travel outside London - a journey, she felt, was becoming all too terrifyingly brief.

Jekyll singled out "The Old Ploughman's Song," which

is still sung in the neighbouring village, where it has a local record of quite a hundred years. But its age is written in its wording, as may be seen by the now obsolete use of the word 'painful,' which formerly meant industrious or laborious. It was written out by the present singer, and though some of the lines are rugged and their sense obscure, I thought it best to transcribe it faithfully, without attempting to mend the weaker places" (247).

It follows the oral tradition in ballad form. More importantly, it is "sung," and has been passed down generations. McKay reminded his readers that he considered his poems in *Songs of Jamaica* "songs," which have traveled from Africa to the Caribbean, from mother and father to son and daughter. "The Ploughman's Song," which sings of the vanished culture of West Surrey, begins

Come all you Jolly Ploughmen, with courage Stout and Bold,
That labour's all the Winter in Stormy Winds and Cold,
To clothe the Fields with Plenty, your Farm Yards to renew
To crown them with Contentment behold the painful Plough.

Adam was a Ploughman when ploughing did begin
The next that did succeed him was Cain his eldest Son
None of this generation that's calling now pursue
The bread that may be wanting remains the painful Plough.

Adam in the Garden was sent to keep it right
The length of time he staved there I believe it's said one night
Yet of his own labours I call it not due
For soon he lost his Garden and went and held the Plough.

Oh Ploughman said the Gardener don't count your trade with ours
Walk through the Garden and View the earliest Flowers
Also the curious borders and the pleasant View
There's not such peace and plenty performed by the Plough.

Behold the wealthy Merchant that Trades in Foreign Seas
That brings us Gold and Treasures for those that live at Home at Ease
For we must have Bread and Biscuits, Rice Flour Pudding and Pease
To feed our Jolly Sailors, as they Sails on the Seas.

Sampson was the Springest Man and Solomon was Wise
Alexander for Conqueror was all His daily Pride
King David he was Valliant and many a Thousand Slew
Yet none of His Brave Heroes could live without the Plough.

I hope there is none offended with my for singing this
For it was not intended for any thing amiss
But if considered rightly you will find what I say is true
That the Wealth of the Nation depends upon the Plough.

Gertrude Jekyll's recovery of English folk culture - a vernacular tradition that extended several hundred years across geography and generations - inspired her brother Walter's work in Jamaica, who likewise chronicled the folkways of Port Royal Mountains, behind Kingston, three years later in 1907, the year he first met McKay, who was apprenticing as a young seventeen-year-old wheelwright. The meaning and significance of

“the plough” – gardening, the village, the old ways – were preoccupations of Walter Jekyll’s work in Jamaica as well, and helped to shape McKay’s esthetics. *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* was Walter Jekyll’s “tribute to my love for Jamaica and its dusky inhabitants, with their winning ways and their many good qualities, among which is to be reckoned that supreme virtue, Cheerfulness” (*Annancy Stores*, “Author’s Preface”).¹ His work was also an attempt against the onslaught of the mechanical age. Walter’s remarks evoke an image of the noble savage; yet it also reflects a deep longing for the rustic.

Gertrude Jekyll, too, celebrated the vernacular culture of England, in very much the same language:

Bright and cheerful of face, pleasant and kindly of speech, courteous of manner,
they are a precious reminder of those older days when men’s lives were simpler
and quieter.” (*Old Surrey*, 218)

In Jekyll’s “faithful transcription” we find also the fears and anxieties of a changing world, of foreign labor and goods. Much like George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), there is a sense of the unspoken, the gap in significance – the absent merchant who is off seeking wealth and fame in colonial outposts, while the working-class peasant struggles with the advance of modernity and capital culture. One wonders if Jekyll’s inclusion of this song is her way of alluding to – and indirectly critiquing – a class of wanderlust adventurers

¹ Walter Jekyll’s inscription is a poem by the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier:
*A few brief years have passed away
Since Britain drove her million slaves
Beneath the tropic’s fiery ray:
God willed their freedom; and to-day
Life blooms above those island graves!*

that included her brothers Walter and Herbert. Gertrude Jekyll's interest in "The Ploughman's Song," in which the "Wealth of the nation depends upon the Plough," is filled with the same disenchantment that compelled Walter to travel in search of his Eden. For Walter, however, there was no tradition to resurrect or preserve. The folk, for brother and sister, became the only reliable buttress against modernity.

In significant ways, McKay's "A Labourer's Life Give Me" has the same focus upon the soil as "The Old Ploughman's Song." It, too, celebrates authentic peasant labor, and bemoans the tragic situation that the promises of industrial capitalism create. The poet, in the guise of the rustic and son of the earth, explains that he was "never ashamed o' de soil," and quickly turns his English reader's ear: "So you need't remind me of it."

I was born midst de moil an de toil,
An' I'll never despise it a bit.

"Sen' me back to de cutliss an' hoe!"
I don't mind, Sir, a wud dat you say,
For little, it seems, you do know
Of de thing dat you sneer at to-day.

If I'd followed a peasant's career,
I would now be a happier lad;
You wopuld not be abusing me here,
An' mekin' me sorrn an' sad.

Fool! I hated my precious birthright,
Scornin' what made my father a man;
Now I grope in de pitchv night,
Hate de dav when me poo' life began.

To de loved country life I'll return,
I don't mind at all, Sir, if you smile'
As a peasant my livin' I'll earn,
An a labourer's life is worth while.

As a labourer's livin' content,
Wid at night a rest-place for me head.

Oh! How gaily my life will be spent,
Wid de baneful ambition gone dead.

An' when, after a day's wukin' hard,
I go home to a fair'ful wifee,
For my toilin' dere'll be its reward,
A peaceful heart happy an' free.

An' me children shall grow strong an' true,
But I'll teach dem dat life is a farce,
An' de best in dis wul' dey can do
Is to bear with content its sad cross.

So I'll make meself happy at home,
An' my life will be pleasanter yet;
I will take de hard knocks as dey come,
But will conquer de worry an' fret.

Oh! A labourer's life is my desire
In de hot sun an' pure season rains,
When de glow o'de dark-red bush fire
Sends a new blood a-flow'n' t'rough me veins.

The relationship to the earth is powerful connective tissue, and unites the hybridized traditions of Jamaica with the indigenous cultures elsewhere, whether Scotland or West Surrey. Again in "My Native Land, My Home," the soil is his cultural strength, and is his passport to other lands and readers, speaking in a language that is understood by all peasants and those disenchanted with the modern age.

Dere is no land dat can compare
Wid you where'er I roam'
In all de wul' none like you fair,
My native land, my home.

Jamaica is de nigger's place,
No mind whe' some declare;
Although dem call we "no-land race,"
I know we home is here.

You give me life an' nourishment,
No udder land I know;
My lub I neber can repent,
For all to you I owe.

E'ev ef' vou mek me beggar die,
I'll trust vou all de same,
An' none de less on vou relv,
Nor saddle vou wid blame.

Though vou mav cas' me from vour breas'
An' trample me to deat',
Mv heart will trus' vou none the less,
Mv land I won't feget.

An' I hope none o' vour sons would
Refuse deir strengt' to lend,
An' drain de last drop o' deir blood
Their countrv to defend.

You draw de t'ousan' from deir shore,
An' all 'long keep dem please';
De invalid come here fe cure,
You heal all dier disease.

Your fertile soil grow all o' t'ings
To full de navgur's wants,
'Tis seamed wid neber-failing springs
To give dew to de plants.

You hab all t'ings de mek life bles',
But buccra 'poil de whole
Wid gove'mint an' all de res',
Fe worry navgur soul.

The poems ends cryptically:

Still all dem chupidness
Caan' tek away me lub;
De time when I'll tu'n 'gains vou is
When you can't give me grub.

Does McKay hint at a rebellion against the "fertile land," and or the English Empire, which he associates with "all dem little chupidness" - the stupidities of domination and control? Although "buccra" - the plantation owner - is implicated here as a source of exploitation, it is "Wid gover'mint," McKay insinuates, that worries the "navgur soul." This gets him off the hook, at least in terms of creating ill-favor among the upper classes, who

were equally disturbed by their government, and one wonders if the longing for “home” is a subtle call for revolution. Even in this early poem, I believe McKay articulates an international consciousness, which bypassed national identification, whether in the Caribbean, Africa, or Europe, and linked the notion of land to self-determination (a project that Olivier, the Georgists, and the Fabians espoused). In fact, McKay echoes Olivier’s fondness for the “protected placidity” of Jamaica, a place he was reluctant to leave for the “troublesome world” of England. The tropics were, according to Olivier, “a nigger’s paradise” and McKay shared that view when he celebrates Jamaica as “de nigger’s place.” But it is also a place where “fetile soil grow all o’ t’ings” and offers cures for “all deir disease” (an allusion to Jekyll’s reasons for moving to the island climate), and an attraction for “de t’ousan from deir shore” – the tourists and adventurers. Neither assimilation nor oppression will remove the love of the soil from the peasant’s heart. *

IT WAS DURING A VISIT TO CAMBRIDGE IN 1869, THAT JEKYLL MET WILLIAM MORRIS, a proponent of the Arts and Craft Movement in England. It was a disappointing moment for her. Their only common interest seemed to be John Ruskin, who they both admired. Both Ruskin and Morris advocated a return to handicrafts and to medieval conditions of production; workers’ control over production; a concern for the sanctity of nature over

* “My Native Land, My Home,” in *The Dialect Poetry of Claude McKay*, p. 84-85. Letter to Sidney Webb, from Belize, British Honduras (November 21, 1890); to H.G. Wells, May 29, 1905. (*Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings*, pp. 85, 127.)

capital. While Jekyll readily embraced these concepts, she had difficulty with the patriarchy of the Arts and Crafts Movement. But she also did not fit the female goddess image of the Pre-Raphaelite, which was exaggerated by Morris and others. Jekyll was short and stout, and wore glasses. Nor was she impressed by the worker relationship promoted by Morris between men and women. On one occasion, when she visited William Morris's firm, Morris & Company, an association of craftsmen whose members included Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which produced hand-crafted goods for the home, she found that working conditions for women below conventional low-pay industries. She was shocked to find that Morris' utopian ideas were far from equitable. When the Art Workers' Guild and Working Men's Guild was established, at the insistence of Ruskin, to improve design or to eliminate labor exploitation, their concerns bypassed working women by excluding them from membership. Jekyll admired much of the ideas embodied in the movement (such as the emphasis on simplicity and folk values), but remained aloof from their more male-centered actions.⁵ Jekyll nevertheless was inspired to work with design and crafts, and mastered an array of occupations including embroidery, carving, modeling, house-painting, carpentry, smith's work, repoussé work, gilding, wood-inlaying, embroidery, sign-painting - all which she would weave within a tapestry of the natural garden. She attended South Kensington Art School where she formally combined "plant-

⁵ Morris's daughter, Mav Morris, and his wife, as well as Charles Faulkner's sisters and Georgiana Burne-Jones, were all not paid for their labor in the work place. "The only women who received wages were countless employees producing the bulk of the firm's embroideries. Thus there was a fairly strong form of discrimination in an establishment with radical social aims." Sally Festing, in *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 56. For a fictional idealization of femaleness by Morris, see *News from Nowhere* (1891), which portrays women as goddesses within a socialistic, egalitarian utopia based on "work-pleasure." Festing implies that Jekyll might have been active in the Arts and Crafts Movement had there been a "more feminist climate" (96).

inspired fabric designs by Christopher Dresser and Owen Jones” with the unity of Arts and Crafts esthetics.⁶

Though disappointed with Morris and his enterprise, the 22-year old painter also sought out Ruskin. She had met the 44-year-old writer four years earlier, in 1865, and that meeting was more fruitful. There was a lively exchanged of ideas on art and esthetics.⁷ Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, which was published in 1862, but serialized in Thackeray's popular monthly magazine *Cornhill*, had condemned materialism and laissez-faire economics as an affront to moral and esthetic values. But it was Ruskin's views on nature and culture that appealed to the young artist. Though she did not know it at the time, Ruskin would help her to shape the notion of the English garden space, which became the source of her attack on materialism.⁸

But whereas Ruskin, moving imaginatively to Venice (to produce *The Stones of Venice*, in 1851-53) as a critique of English, Jekyll opted for Algeria, which helped to shape her views of English cottage designs. But she also endorsed Ruskin's notion that a country's architecture “speaks” for its culture and people. She, too, looked skeptically at the artificiality of Victorian and even Gothic design. For her, architecture was not simply about buildings. It also meant indigenous – the simple dwellings of rural communities on the outskirts of London, which came to symbolize the heart and soul of “old England.” In

⁶ Sally Festing, *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 63.

⁷ Ruskin believed that great art is moral and should inspire national cohesion, especially as the working men of industrial England were becoming increasingly impoverished spiritually. Individuality, for Ruskin, was found in the medieval artists, and he expressed this view in *The Stones of Venice*. Like the Pre-Raphaelites (he was a patron of D. G. Rossetti, their leader), he found the contrast to the England of his day in the freedom of individual response to environment among the medieval artists.

contrast, Jekyll's esthetics were less about nation-enhancing, as some critics have come to understand Ruskin, than about a type of bio-regionalism:

From roof to cellar rightly built with the best available material of the district; the work done by the labourers and craftsmen of the place, thereby securing those valuable local traditional ways of handling material and of treating detail that give such individual interest to the houses of a county or district.⁸

When Jekyll put her esthetics into practice to become her famed Munstead Wood estate, it was "simple" and "straightforward," made from local materials in the "Surrey style" (qtd. *Gertrude Jekyll* 122).

Cottages hewn from local materials harbouring men and women whose crafts linked them with the land. Everything fitted, and all, she saw with highly coloured, short-sighted poignancy, was part of a great unity.¹⁰

Indeed, it was a fantasy, but it also was the stuff that inspired colonials in their search for a home. Such a celebration of "home" – and the materials that go into that place – would touch on the feelings and desires in McKay's "My Mountain Home." It, too, displays the same deep-felt need for place, which was being disrupted by the forces of modernity and imperialism. (In Jamaica, of course, it involved the clear-cutting of tropical forests to make way for plantation-style agribusinesses.) For McKay, however, this disruption would never be fully mended; there would be no grand "Munstead Estate" for the body and soul, only a resting place along a hillside for one's travel-weary bones.

De mango tree in yellow bloom,
De pretty akee seed,
De mammee where de John-to-whits come
To have their daily feed,

⁸ *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 27.

⁹ Gertrude Jekyll, "House Decoration," in *National Review* 24.142 (December 1894): 519.

¹⁰ Sally Festing, in *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 52.

Show you de place where I was born,
Of which I am so proud,
"Mongst de banana-field an' corn
On a lone mouintain-road.

One Sundav mamin' 'fo' de hour
Fe service-time come on,
Ma sav dat I be'n born to her
Her little las'v son.

Those early days be'n neber dull,
Mv heart was ebergreen;
How I did lub mv little wul'
Surrounded by pingwin!

An' growin' vp, with sweet freedom
About de vard I'd run;
An' tired out I'd hide me from
De fierce heat of de sun.

So glad I was de fus' day when
Ma sent me to de spring;
I was so happy feelin' then
Dat I could do somet'ing.

Across class difference, Gertrude Jekyll would have understood McKay's colonial dilemma when he became "a man": to be among "Strange folks in a strange lan'."

Mv little joys, mv wholesome min',
Dev bullied out o' me,
And made me daily mourn an' pine
An' wish dat I was free.

Dev taught me to distrust mv life,
Dev taught me what was grief;
For months I travailed in de strife,
'Fo' I could find relief.

McKay evokes the Shakespearean alterego of "my Will," which he no doubt studied and read about in *The Sonnets*.

But I'll return again, my Will,
An' where my wild ferns grow
An' weep for me on Dawkin's Hill,
Dere, Willie, I shall go.

An' dere is somet'ing near forgot,
Although I lub it best;
It is de loved, de hallowed spot
Where mv dear mother rest.

Look good an' find it, Willie dear,
See dat from bush 'tis free;
Remember that mv heart is near,
An' vou sav vou lub me.

An' plant on it mv fav'rite fer,
Which I be'n usual wear;
In days to come I shall return
To end mv wand'rin's dere.

Unlike Jekyll's rootedness, McKay is taken further away from his beloved mountain home. Feelings of place momentarily unite colonizer and colonized. "But I'll return," the poet announces defiantly, while he asks that no one weep at his grave site on Dawkin's Hill. In spirit, he lives among his "wild ferns," in contrast to Jekyll's almost clinical admiration of the fern's native simplicity.

Propagating this natural garden through old England, along with McKay's "wild ferns," was Jekyll's passion. William Robinson's *The Wild Garden* formalized this approach to gardening in 1870, a time when Jekyll was in search of an artistic esthetic. Robinson was the first to sever esthetic connections with Victorian formalism and its confining morality. *The Garden: An Illustrated Weekly of Horticulture and All Its Branches*, published in London by Robinson as a four-penny weekly, would become the foremost proponent of the virtues of naturalized settings of "native and exotic plants from the temperate regions" in everyday uses: from fields, woods, copses and neglected places to

gardens and parks.¹¹ Ruskin, inspired Robinson to wrote *Alpine Flowers for English Gardens*, *Hardy Flowers*, and *The Subtropical Garden*, because of his interest in mountain flora, would become a contributor to *The Garden*. Jekyll, too, was attracted to *The Garden* circle. Suffrage, a growing anti-war movement, and a discreet lesbian affairs had cooled her interests in Morris, who she found particularly insensitive toward women.

With feminist Barbara Bodichon, beginning in 1872, she collaborated on Bodichon's Scalands in Sussex - used as a retreat for women - which, like Munstead House Garden, was in the vernacular cottage garden style. Bodichon, who was active in the suffrage movement, also sponsored Jekyll's trip to Algeria and North Africa. Jekyll began her excursion at Lake Geneve, and traveled by train to Turin, Genoa, Marseilles, and on to Algeria, where she met Bodichon in the winter of 1873. Jekyll did little sightseeing, and instead spent her time sketching designs from traditional dresses, embroidery and tiles.¹² She also went on garden walks, organized by a botanist from the University of Algiers, and took copious notes and made extensive copies, which she later incorporated in her articles for *The Garden*, as well as in her designs.¹³

The yuccas that are a prominent part of Jekyll's gardening theme may well owe their inspiration to opuntias, cultivated [in Algeria] in tiny domestic allotments with figs and apricots, gigantic agaves that line roadsides or palms and banana trees which stand like monuments in public squares. (Festing 74)

¹¹ Sally Festing, *Gertrude Jekyll*, p. 66.

¹² Algeria and North Africa have been a continual inspiration for designers. Newspapers in March 2002, for instance, remarked on the retirement of Yves St. Laurent, a fashion designer who also brought about a revolution in design with colors and patterns from Algeria.

¹³ Years later, in 1881, Jekyll continued to describe some of the exotic plants she received from her tutor in Algiers, M. Durango, such as the *Cyclamen africanum* tuber "measuring 24 ¼ in. and weighting 3 lb. 5 oz.," and the *Scilla maritima*, "22 ½ inches, weighing 5 lb. 13 oz. with its leaves," quoted in Festing, p. 91

On February 3, 1883, she received another packet from Algeria, and sent Kew Gardens (a central repository for botanical specimens from around the world), the *adiantum maritima* she received earlier from Algeria. She also sent a species of fern, the *adiantum*, from Brazil. On November 9, she wrote in her journal that the first blooms of *iris stylosa*, which she planted after her trip to Algiers, beat all previous records.¹⁴ Indeed, gardening and horticulture “in all its branches” was “Like a Strong Tree,” a poem by McKay.¹⁵ It had exciting metaphoric dimensions in this early period of modernism and globalization, and straddled, uneasily, two desires – imperialistic intervention abroad and nationalist unity at home. These two polarities come discretely together in the altruism of gardening, which had as its base not economic or political exploitation, but aesthetics and labor.

Jekyll sought “simplicity of intention,” and her credo was, “Out of necessity of Unity, arises that of Variety.” She wrote in *The Garden*: “Should it not be remembered that in setting a garden we are painting a picture, only it is a picture of hundreds of feet or yards instead of so many inches?”¹⁶ She “had no sympathy with the system” of Victorian garden bedding and wished “only for its extinction.”¹⁷ In 1883, writing in *The English Flower Garden*, Jekyll criticized then old order: “At present the rule is no art, no good grouping, no garden picture, no variety; but instead repetition and conformity” (100).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁵ Soon after Jekyll’s tenure as editor the title as well as the focus of the journal changed from “An illustrated Weekly Journal of Horticulture in All Its Branches” to a journal “for Garden and Woodland Areas,” a change that reflected more sedate gardening tastes.

¹⁶ Festing, p. 97.

¹⁷ *The Garden* (Volume 22), quoted in Festing, p. 98.

IN 1900 WITH THE ENGLISH EMPIRE EMBROILED IN THE BOER WAR, which would escalate toward an eventual world war, Jekyll wrote her first editorial for *The Garden* as its new editor.

The British are a gardening nation, more so at the present age, perhaps, than in the early days of the Victorian era, and those who at one period considered the garden as a shop from which to draw daily stores, now find enjoyment in its poetic aspect, and grow the flowers and fruits with a keen sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that a world hereto veiled in mystery is being explored and is yielding undreamed-of pleasure.

Like her brothers Herbert and Walter, and Sydney Olivier, the English envisioned themselves as natural gardeners. They were careful cultivators of the land, and saw themselves as rustic Adams and Eves in Britain, while the colonies were looked on as Eden. Every Englishman had his "plot" – even as far away as Khartum – and cultivated his land, regardless of shifting borders and political unrest. But the journal cautioned:

This restless age urges the younger horticulturist to follow in the footsteps of those good men who earthly work has not been completed, but remains for others to take up and again hand down to future generations.¹⁶

The Garden covered that imperial world, with notices from Africa, North and South America, the Middle East, India, China, Japan, Europe, and elsewhere. Interspersed were personal memoirs, such as the valiant struggles of the "Englishman doing his duty" in the "Nileless desert" of the Soudan: "solitary prisoner though he was – at least his last anxious days were somewhat refreshed and solaced by his little garden" But, importantly, was the exchange of information between colony and empire. "Horticulturists from abroad," the editors noted, "came to this conference to take their part in an important event which

¹⁶ *The Garden*, January 13, 1900, p. 1

concerned not merely our own land, but the nations of the world, who have contributed to the storehouse of new and improved forms of plant life.”¹⁹

Jekyll actively encouraged experimentation (although a proponent of cottage gardening, she was an advocate of intermixing and hybridizing tropical and native specimens), and the journal published reports of gardening from around the world. In the same issue (January 13, 1900) is a discussion of hybridization, which might seem odd from the perspective of traditionalists attempting to preserve a type of cultural purity. But Jekyll was not looking for variety so much as endurance. The ostentation of the Victorian imperial period revolted her: the palatial Georgian style, the segregated, boxed gardens, the emphasis on heirloom plant breeds. These were the things that reflected the old British esthetics; they also were disturbing because they reflected the old way of dealing with cultures – whether plant or human. Hybridization – and hardy interbreeding – were to be encouraged for the good of “humanity,” the editors imply. (This notion, we will see, reappears in the progressive politics of the Fabian socialists, and one of their chief architects, Sydney Olivier, encouraged just such interbreeding – for the good of “humanity” while governor of Jamaica. In America, Frederick Douglass became its chief advocate):

The hybridization conference held in the Royal Horticultural Society’s Gardens at Chiswick was a notable event, not merely of the past year, but of the entire century. When the horticultural history of the nineteenth century comes to be written, plant hybridization should form its most splendid chapter, and every month we receive gifts from those who have made this their especial study.

Heralding her editorship as a venture into a “restless” new age, Jekyll saw horticulture and the interest in the rustic ways of ancestors as a “precious heritage” that “for

¹⁹ *The Garden*, January 13, 1900.

many years been lost.”²⁰ Our “bondage to fashion” – which Gertrude would later associate with the twentieth century and the modern age – has driven out common sense and a love of enduring traditions. The essay concluded that “The benefit is one which is not only individual but national.”

In another issue the fears and hopes of the editors – particularly Gertrude Jekyll – are more evident. “Over the last months the cloud of war has hovered, darkening many a home in our wave-lapped isles and beyond the seas, but we who pursue the peaceful art of gardening are not unmindful of those brave sons fighting for their country’s honour and glory and for our advancement.”²¹ Developments in horticulture and growing interests in gardening, the editors predict, will counter the militarism, then being played out in the colonies. The editors note optimistically: “let us hope that this gardening spirit, a wholesome, healthful and life-giving recreation, will extend its influence to the benefit of humanity.”

McKay debuted as a radical poet through this horticultural exchange. Reviews of *Songs of Jamaica* first appeared in *The Garden and Gardening Illustrated*, and both Gertrude and Agnes Jekyll, whose gardening tips appeared in the *Times of London*, were helpful in spreading the word of this important new poet.

Those who wish to see what country is like in this beautiful island, will get charming pictures of it here. The poet loves his home, and makes us love it too. He dwells much upon the plant life and bird life of his Clarendon hills.²²

²⁰ *The Garden*, January 6, 1900.

²¹ *The Garden*, January 13, 1900.

²² Quoted in *The Daily Gleaner*, March 20, 1912, p. 14.

The Garden (January 27, 1912) review was more detailed, possibly because of its readers' interests in botanical varieties, of which many are mentioned in the book, such as the fox tails and "lush Calalu by the brookside" in the poem "A Dream." The review also noted the many "interesting allusions" to plants, the journal notes

The food plants – Bananas, Peas, Beans, Yams, Calalu (Spinach), Coccoes, Sweet Potatoes, etc. – figure prominently. His poet's eye is caught by the blue tint of the Maize and the modest flower of the Cockstones (French Beans); he notes the growth of the Bannabees (a climbing Bean) scrambling over the Mango in the yard and of the lush Calalu by the brookside. In his mention of flowers proper, he does not fail to mark the blueness of the leaf of the Dog Rose, which the lad picks to give his lass; and the Bellflowers (Daturas), fading under the heat of the climbing sun, show by their wilting their sympathy with the lovers who sit beneath the Yampy shade (*The Garden*, January 27, 1912; qtd. in *Daily Gleaner*, February 19, 1912, p. 10)

McKay was called "a son of the soil," who had "a real poetic gift"; someone who "writes in the pretty Jamaican variant of English, a tongue which will present no difficulty to the reader who consults Mr. Walter Jekyll's Preface and Notes." McKay's literary talents, were overlooked in both journals and his role was seen as a conveyor of folk botanica. But McKay's "interesting allusions" re-invigorated English poetic meaning, and his complexity was jarring, if not breathtaking. The venerable Dog Rose, for instance, that beloved flower of choice of Elizabethan romances, in McKay's handling, is transformed to "De Dog-Rose" that grows stubbornly by "de corner-stone."

Growin' by de corner-stone,
See de pretty flow'r-tree blows,
Sendin' from de prickly branch
A lubly bunch of red dog-rose.

An' de bunch o' crimsonred,
Boastin' on de dark blue tree,
Mekes it pretty, prettier yet
Jes' as dat dog-rose can be.

Young Miss Sal jes' come from school:
Freddy, fresh from groun' an' grub,

Pick de dog-rose off de tree,
Gib Miss Sal to prove his lub

An' I listen to deir talk,
As dev sav dev will be true;
"Eber true" I hear dem pledge,
An' dat naught can part dem two.

Used as a metaphor to convey disease, sickness, and authenticity in Elizabeth poetry, particularly in Shakespeare's time, whose sonnets McKay studied, the dog-rose is at the center of a Creole romance. In contrast to its English meaning of decay, the dog-rose is used here to connote both rootedness *and* hybridity. A temperate plant that was an enduring trope in English literary romantic traditions, McKay had a vague inkling of its meanings. Thus the dog-rose is evoked within a fractured English tradition, and becomes implicated in a larger tradition of colonial deceit. It is this "charming naiveté" – much like the presumptions of a English reader of dialect verse – that delighted many of the English readers of McKay's "love poems" in ballad form. The dog-rose and Miss Sal, particularly, become devices for an exploration of cultural masquerade and hybridity. While time goes on, "de rose is not" – it has withered and died. Fred, Sal's lover, is seen "Huggin up de corner-stone" in grief. A peasant of "groun' an' grub," Fred's teary eyes fall upon a circling gray king bird, the tyrant fly-catcher petchary that is indigenous to the West Indies. Yet it is to the poet to whom the "petchary" knowingly speaks: "How de whole t'ing gwin fe go." Sal trades her love for money, running off with "anedder man" who has carried a "pile o' money" from "his land O' de Injin coney" – an allusion to either England or Scotland, as Jekyll explains in a note, symbolized by the rabbit, which is not native to the Caribbean. That fact, then, is significant. One is reminded of Thomas MacDermot, the transplanted English-Scottish editor of *Jamaica Times*, who published McKay's poems, and wrote of a love affair in 1909 called *One Brown Gal and – A Jamaican Story*. The dog-rose withers and, soon after, dies – another casualty to locale. Both the petchary and the dog-rose are gone, and Sal now sits in her great-house cooing to her baby. What is one to make of her "hearty

endurance"? The image reminds one of Bita in *Banana Bottom*, who is seen as a child marked by tragedy. Is the poet saying that "life" begins with accommodation?

"Beneath the Yampy Shade," considered by reviewers at the time the best of McKay's love poems, moves still closer to the English tradition. It has all the botanical detail that interested horticulturists, within a ballad romance frame that involves, again, a folk-peasant narrator.

We sit beneat' de vampy shade,
My lee sweetheart an' I;
De gully ripples 'cross de glade,
Tom Raffins hurry by.

Her pa an' ma about de tiel'
Are bruikin sugar-pine;
An' plenty, plenty is de viel',
Dem looks so pink an' fine.

We listen to a rapturous chune [tune]
Outpourin' from above;
De swee-swees, blithesome birds of June,
They sing to us of love.

She plays wid de triangle leaves,
Her hand within mine slips;
She murmurs love, her bosom heaves,
I kiss her ripe, ripe lips.

De cockstones raise deir droopin' heads
To view her pretty feet;
De skellions trimble in deir beds,
Dev grudge our lub so sweet -

Love sweeter than a bridal dream,
A mudder's fondest kiss;
Love purer than a crystal stream,
De height of eart'ly bliss.

We hear again de swee-swees' song
Outpourin' on de air;
Dey sing for yout', an' we are young
An' know naught 'bouten care.

We sit beneat' de vampy shade,
We pledge our hearts anew;
De sweet-swees droop, de bell-flowers fade
Before our love so true.

Nature and desire are intertwined with "mad ants" scurrying by – the Tom Ruffins – and the sweets-swees singing "of Love." Leaves and "hair" become equally desirous objects and the "cockstones" take on a sexual aura as they raise "deir droopin' head" when "Her hand within mine slips." The humidity of the noonday is cooler than the heat of this "Outpourin' on de air," in which the swee-swees droop and the bell-flowers – a plant that is best cultivated in the shade – fade "Before our love so true." "Beneath the Yampy Shade" is a convenient prop for McKay's botanical foray into Jamaican natural terrain. In another poem, "King Banana," the poet is more direct in his attacks on colonial agriculture, a topic that would interest *Garden* readers.

Green Mancha mek fe navgur man;
Wha' sweet so when it roas'?
Some boil it in a big black pan,
It sweeter in a toas'.

A buccra fancy when it ripe,
Dem use it ebery day;
It scarcely give dem belly-gripe,
Dem eat it diffran' way.

Out vonder see somoke a rise,
An' see de fire wincket;
Deh go'p to heaben wid de nize
Of hundred t'ousan crickev.

De black mou' lie do'n quite prepare'
Fe feel de hoe and rake;
De fire bu'n, and it tek care
Fe mek de wo'm dem wake.

Wha' lef' fe buccra tach again
Dis time about plantation?
Dere's not'in dat can beat de plain
Good ole-time cultivation.

Banana dem fat all de same
From bunches big an' 'trong;
Pure nin'han' bunch a car' de tame, -
Ole met'od all along.

De cuttin' done same ole-time wav,
We wrap dem in a trash,
An' pack dem neatlv in a drav
So tight dat dem can't mash.

We re'ch: banana finish sell;
Den we 'tart back fe home:
Some hab money in t'read-bag well,
Some spen' all in a rum.

Green mancha mek fe navgur man,
It mek fe him all wav;
Our islan' is banana lan',
Banana car' de swav.

The poem concludes that banana carries “de sway”; meaning that it has the power to effect change. Again a coded message, McKay writes in his “report” that banana is power: to those who harvest it as well as those who buy it. Against this imperial enterprise, McKay explains the “ole-time” way of “cultivation.” McKay contrasts the plantation way against the “ole met'od” - with which Jekyll and readers of *The Garden* might have agreed. “Buccra” - much like the Victorian formality in gardening design opposed by the Jekylls and other “natural” gardeners - is associated with a system that erodes the soil as well as the soul. When McKay ends with the note that banana “car' de sway” - it speaks to a history clearly understand by colonizer and colonized, unlike the legacies of rum or sugar. The “banana trade,” as it was called, became an agricultural boom in the late nineteenth century, and had “emerged overnight , eclipsing sugar with astonishing rapidity. Banana was a “humble but valued fruit cultivated primarily by slaves on their provision grounds and by their descendants.” It was one of the first crops introduced in the Caribbean, sometime in the

sixteenth century. According to Olivier, banana cultivation was despised by the planters as "a backwoods 'nigger business,' which any old-time sugar planter would have disdained to handle or, if tempted by undeniable prospects of profit, would have thought an apology was required." In 1899, however, Jamaican merchants, along with American business interests, began large-scale banana cultivation. McKay's father and brother would become involved in the burgeoning banana business, which was so idyllically described in his poem. Uriah Theodore would trade in his profession as a low-paying teacher to become a roker for his family's banana interests.²³

THE NOTION OF LAND, THEN, UNITED ENGLISH GARDENERS AND COLONIALS who were seeking an esthetic based on self-determination. It made strange bedfellows, but it satisfied a need for cultural wholeness that the new age of materialism and class struggle was unable to do. The solution for all these radicals – of varying hues – was to "get people back upon the land," as Gertrude Jekyll wrote, a sentiment expressed by McKay in "My Native Land, My Home" as well. The notion of the artfulness and esthetics of "the land" as humanizing society, wrote Jekyll, would awaken

men's minds to the comprehension of the ethical relation of art, not only to the higher human intelligence, but also to the simple need and experiences of daily life. ²⁴

²³ Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (Verso, 2000); Olivier, *Jamaica: A Blessed Island* (Farber and Farber, 1936), pp. 377-9.

²⁴ "John Ruskin: An Appreciation," *The Garden* (February 3, 1900).

These radicals reflected a moment in Europe's expansion in which progress – taken for taken today – was found deeply disturbing. Although we would view the Jekylls and Olivier as products of their class, they were pragmatic revolutionaries whose beliefs were anchored upon moral and communal values. Gertrude Jekyll produced no philosophical works on the grand scale of Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, nor did she not issue manifestoes, as was the vogue. Yet neither was she an escapist, as Morris was in his retreat to fantasy. Her revolution was a personal one, between her and the soil. Her manifesto became her garden, which necessitated that it embrace other cultures for its survival: Alongside hardy native ferns and her beloved *loneria* (honey suckle), Gertrude planted yuccas from Mexico and other varieties of plants from Algiers. She really didn't think in terms of a "nationalized, English culture," but of an "inter-nationalism" that spoke from a different era and temperament.

As biographers Judith Tankard and Michael R. Van Valkenburgh point out in *Gertrude Jekyll: A Vision of Garden and Wood* (New York: Abrams, 1988):

The eventual rise of Modernism as the dominant movement in art and design in the twentieth century was an important factor in the decline of the flower as a focus of landscape design

The naturalized flora of Jekyll's esthetic and McKay's romanticized rootedness clashed repeatedly with the rise of this modernist palate. Their modernism was neither high, nationalistic, nor utilitarian, and both imagined themselves as "rare flowers" against this conformity.²⁵ As Tankard and Van Valkenburgh point out

²⁵ McKay to Ogden, 1922. William Ready.

Flowers were the antithesis of Modernism. They weren't easily molded, they were never permanent, they were hardly ever sleek and were only occasionally functional" (23).

Jekyll saw modernist tendencies, which erupted out of the growing global clamor of WWI, as destructive of this fragile, organic synthesis. It is symbolic that Jekyll ceased her photo-keeping albums, which documented Old Surrey and other favorite landscapes, at the onset of WWI; her last recorded date is August 14, 1914, marking the beginning of England's involvement in the war (Tankard 20). It would come to symbolize, for Jekyll, a bitter victory for the new order. ²⁰

²⁰ Declining wealth and the global financial depression of the 1930s, necessitating the loss of the gardener who had cared for such high-maintenance flower gardens, may have contributed to the elimination of many of the country estates designed by Gertrude Jekyll. "These factors, combined with the rise of Modernism and the shift of emphasis from private gardens to civil landscapes, brought to a close the era of country estates in England characterized by Gertrude Jekyll's herbaceous border" (Tankard 20).

II

Resistances

Ignorant, degraded, and repulsive as the Negro was during his 200 years of slavery, he was sufficiently attractive to make possible an intermediate race of a million more or less of the Caucasian variety. If this has taken place in the face of those odious barriers what is likely to occur when man puts away his ignorance and degradation and becomes educated and prosperous? ¹

FROM THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR I, race arose as an emblem of both American progress and democracy. A plethora of writing from Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke to William James, Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne re-imagined America's cultural landscape through race and ethnic difference. Contradistinctively, it was also a time when the newly defined "color line" - which, as DuBois wrote, would shape the texture of twentieth-century political discourse - rigidified along a nationalist chauvinism that built upon the myth-making of American exceptionalism - and used, in some cases, as an antidote to diasporic and internationalist movements. Locke, in particular, was aware of the significance of race in the new century and became a brash proponent of the New Negro. The color line, some would argue, had more to do with lines of conformity than diversity and complexion. Frederick Douglass, for instance, known as a leading abolitionist of the nineteenth century, anticipated the early twentieth-century cultural terrain of a new internationalism. He spoke of suffrage and

abolitionist ideas, that came of age in the early nineteenth century, whose work needed completion in the new age of progressive politics and capitalism. Douglass viewed cosmopolitanism as a synonym for racial progress and, for him and others, Harlem became the global headquarters for this new zeitgeist. Instead of isolated black intellectual thought, Harlem was a place of intense activity and interaction.² Although he placed too much hope in the *cosmopolis* as a race-free zone, he also reflected a deep disenchantment with American provincialism and Jeffersonian rural ideals, which were the mainstay of the nineteenth century. It is the city where the racial divide would be conquered, Douglass – and later, Locke – predicted. And it proved to be partly true. In Harlem, black and white did come together, but along racial stereotypes. As Robert Butler has noted, Douglass sought “salvation by rejecting pastoral space altogether and pursuing a radically new life in the city” (23). Douglass reflected his age by also being a romantic. As early as December 7, 1869, Douglass unsettled the formation of racial and social lines in the Reconstruction era by pronouncing, in an early postbellum lecture, that “Europe and Africa are already here.” In that speech he saw America in transition from the provincialism of a single-nation culture to a diverse vibrant cosmopolitanism. He went on to say:

It is no disparagement to Americans of English descent to affirm that much of the wealth, leisure, culture, refinement and civilization of the country are due to the

¹ Frederick Douglass, “The Future of the Negro,” July 1884.

² George Hutchinson’s *Harlem in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1995) and Ross Posnick’s *Color & Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1998), that attempt to connect black thinking to philosophical ideas popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hutchinson and Posnick connect Alain Locke’s and W.E.B. DuBois’s writings to ideas of cultural diversity that were hinted at and articulated by philosophers such as John Dewey and William James, and disseminated by Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Claude McKay, and others. While Hutchinson and Posnick attempt to interpret the Harlem Renaissance as a reaction, or counterweight, to European hegemonic modernism, they fail, I believe, to see in those very ideas of Locke and DuBois a deeper connection to an earlier cultural movement, that of the American Renaissance.

arm of the negro and the muscle of the Irishman. Without these, and the wealth created by their sturdy toil, English civilization had still lingered this side of the Alleghanies, and the wolf still be howling on their summits. ("Composite Nationality" 256)

But in the late 1800s, as political tensions moved inexorably toward World War I (what the poet Claude McKay had called the "hollowness of nationhood") the women's movement, invested with such promise by Douglass and others, became a powerful force on the modern playing field of international politics, and galvanized a world into action. Douglass, as an abolitionist who supported suffrage as early as 1848, eagerly awaited the clarion call, which sounded in the late nineteenth century. "The tendency of the age," Douglass noted, "is to unification not isolation; not to classes and class, but to human brotherhood" ("Future of the Negro"), and warned: "this new revolution in human thought will never go backward." Not in this country nor, particularly, throughout the world ("Give Women Fair Play" 355).

While Douglass did not live to see his dream of a universal abolitionist movement united by a common humanism come of age, his spirit "lived" among a group of radicals and public intellectuals at the beginning of the century, who advocated for world peace and universal suffrage. Douglass and McKay, the Eastmans and the Pankhursts - even Sydney Olivier, Bernard Shaw, C.K. Ogden - and their publications (*Survey Graphic*, *Liberator*, *Workers' Dreadnought*, *Cambridge Magazine*) all commingled esthetically and politically before turned under by segregated race politics, a devastating war, and

"concerns" about national security.³ Douglass never lost sight of the importance of feminism as a political force that had, as its spiritual center, a concern for diaspora. Douglass would be an untiring advocate for universal suffrage in the 1880s, which increasingly included colonials and women and all oppressed groups – the representatives of Empire.

Douglass' thinking along internationalist lines coincided with his move to Washington, D.C., and marriage to the feminist Helen Pitts. It was an 1886 European tour with Pitt that, for Douglass, marked "a milestone in my experience and journey of life," and afforded a respite from "color prejudice and proscription at home."⁴ Interestingly, against the constraints of Reconstruction and conventional politics, Douglass' solace was the women's movement, which re-invented itself in the late nineteenth century in the unselfish work of a new generation of women radicals. Douglass had always expressed deep-felt appreciation for those women abolitionists who spearheaded the early abolitionist

³ My thinking of the Harlem Renaissance as the continuation of the spirit of the American Renaissance is inspired by Robert Stepto's "call and response" theory in *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (U of Illinois P, 1979). Stepto's theory explains the tradition of African American literature as a series of varied artistic responses to a unifying social call, rooted in Colonial and antebellum slave narratives. I found that in broadening this generic boundary, I could envision early African American literature as a series of "calls" to turn-of-the-century modernist culture; in part, calls for action or, on another level, calls for cultural change. So when a cultural critic like Randolph Bourne sends out a call for new cultural expressions, it is a familiar-sounding call to the African American writer, and one which became the unifying task of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus Stepto's call-and-response-theory is one way of connecting African-American literature to larger cultural issues, and might help to explain the eagerness with which writers of the Harlem Renaissance participated on the cultural front. It places Locke and DuBois, Hughes and McKay, on the same field as Brooks and Bourne, Whitman and Melville, Dewey and James, and it brings the nineteenth century closer to the twentieth.

⁴ An earlier flight to England in 1848, however, was motivated by more imminent fears. He noted: "It would be a proud thing to be able to say, I went abroad as a gentleman and scholar to seek pleasure or to enlarge my stock of knowledge by observation and the study of the peoples, countries, and civilizations older than our own; but truth does not allow me any high-sounding purposes. The fact is, I went to England and Ireland for the purpose of finding liberty and shelter denied me at home." (Archives, Frederick Douglass Collection, p. 6.; *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* 557, 590). Increasingly, Douglass was at odds with former abolitionists,

cause. But only after his marriage to the feminist Helen Pitts, his close secretary for many years, and daughter of a well-known abolitionist family, did he make a firm commitment to speak at several inaugural international women's conferences that rallied around suffrage and social-justice issues.

In his reminisces he connected the early activist spirit of 1848 and Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Women's Call" from Seneca Falls, in which the sacred document on America's independence was challenged: "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men *and* women are created equal!" Unlike the movement toward separatist women's politics in the late twentieth century, Douglass noted that this 300-plus gathering was supported by men *and* women - who were already intimately united by the abolitionist tradition, and along with other male abolitionists, signed the "Call." But with the steady erosion of racial and sexual freedoms in the late nineteenth century, Douglass became angrier. He now saw himself as an "agitator," as the gains and promises in the years immediately following the Civil War receded into fantasy. Effortlessly, he never missed an opportunity to remind audiences of the unfinished business in the decade and century ahead. (However, even by 1920, when women officially celebrated a federal amendment that allowed them to vote, Crystal Eastman noted ironically, that not one of the declaration's 1848 demands had been realized. ⁵)

At the inaugural meeting of the International Council of Women, with representatives from Europe, England, India and Ireland, Douglass critiqued the entrenched

some of whom requested that Douglass keep the tradition of abolition alive by speaking more "authentically" as a Southern Negro.

clubhouse politics that institutionalized racism and patriarchy: "Any man can be brave when the danger is over, go to the front door when there is no resistance, rejoice when the battle is fought and victory is won; but it is not so easy to venture upon a field untried with one-half of the world against you." ⁶ The abolitionist continued:

There are few facts in my humble history to which I look back with more satisfaction than to the fact, recorded in the history of the Woman Suffrage Movement, that I was sufficiently enlightened at that early day, and when only a few years from slavery, to support your resolution for woman suffrage. I have done very little in this world in which to glory except this one act - and I certainly glory in that. When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of woman, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act.

Douglass, like later generations of radicals, saw nationalism as a challenge to universal suffrage. International suffrage, he believed, was a powerful alternative movement to failed domestic policies in the United States. While Douglass may have been unrealistic and utopian in investing such potential in the women's movement, on another level, he was realistically counting numbers among the nations of the world in which one-half or more were disenfranchised. He tallied up the numbers, but realized the significance behind those figures: the "benefits accruing from this movement for the equal rights of woman are not confined or limited to women only." He continued:

They will be shared by every effort to promote progress and welfare of mankind everywhere and in all ages. It was an example and a prophecy of what can be accomplished against strongly opposing forces, against time-hallowed abuses, against deeply entrenched error, against world-wide usage.

⁵ Eastman, "1848-1923," *Time and Tide*, July 27, 1923, p. 753.

⁶ March 31, 1888. Before Douglass spoke, there was a brief "moment of silence" to honor recently deceased co-founder, Lucretia Mott. The meeting took place in Washington, D.C., between March 25 and April 1, 1888, and Douglass, was the first speaker, introduced by Susan B. Anthony, and was followed by Lucy Stone, Henry B. Blackwell, Robert Purvis, Samuel C. Pomeroy, May Wright Sewall, and others. Elizabeth Cady Staton, another organizer from the Seneca Fall days, presided as president.

Like later male suffragettes in the twentieth century (McKay, Eastman, Floyd Dell, Ogden, for instance), Douglass believed that changes in the power ratio between men and women would stimulate social progress: "This achievement of the right to be heard by women, is an accession to the moral force of mankind such as has not been known for centuries," he concluded.⁷

Throughout the 1880s, Douglass lent his support to the development of this new political realignment. He observed in a lecture on May 24, 1886:

Years ago, I heard the same arguments employed against the abolition movement. The slaves were then contented and happy people, who would not have their liberty if it were given them; just as we are now told that women are contented and happy and would not have the ballot if it were given to them. It was not true of the slaves then, and it is not true of women now. The same men who told us of the contentment and happiness of the slaves were, at the same time, busy framing laws to prevent their escape from slavery. The same is being done now in Congress and in the State Legislatures against woman suffrage.⁸

Increasingly, women's suffrage – not class or racial unity – became his campaign. It would also be a mark of unpopularity in the early twentieth century among race leaders and progressive liberals. He believed, as did other internationalists, that women would be in the vanguard of cultural and political change. Another fault that would be leveled at him was that he was out of touch, too preoccupied with global – rather than local – realignments. But his visage was on the twentieth century. He saw this new internationalist

⁷ "The Greatest Revolution the World Has Yet Seen: An address Delivered in Providence, Rhode Island, on 3 December 1884," *Boston Women's Journal* 13 December 1884.

⁸ Douglass papers. "Woman Suffrage," p. 15.

vanguard as “a weapon superior to words, guns, and dynamite, a weapon before which powers and principalities and all forms of oppression may well fear and tremble.” ⁹

Douglass’ new alignment did not escape criticism. Some newspaper columnists speculated on the psychological reasons for Douglass’ shift in focus, from the measured concerns of a race leader to the inflammatory remarks of a globetrotting syndicalist. And there were attempts to discredit Douglass. Resentful of his newly acquired prestige among the budding movement of progressive (read, female) internationalists, white male journalists began to question his intentions (and fixated upon the notion of the black male who is overly driven by sexuality), and his neglect of duties as a race leader (as a former slave, more obsequious of the powers that liberated him). A *Washington Post* reporter interviewed Douglass on January 24, 1884. Did his marriage to a white feminist lessen his effectiveness and influence as a Negro leader, he was asked matter-of-factly?

I do not presume to be a leader, but if I have advocated the cause of the colored people it is not because I am a negro, but because I am a man. The same impulse which would move me to jump into the water to save a white girl from drowning, causes me to espouse the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed wherever I find them. ¹⁰

Aside from the sticky connotation of what Douglass may have meant by pronouncing himself a man, his identification with the oppressed placed him on the other side of race leaders. Douglass, interestingly, viewed women as part of that oppressed class. The woman at the center of that interrogation was hardly downtrodden. A graduate of Mount Holyoke Seminary, she had been working on the radical feminist publication *Alpha* in Washington,

⁹ In a lecture on May 24, 1886, in Boston, Massachusetts, at Tremont Temple. (Douglass Papers, “Woman Suffrage,” p. 4.)

¹⁰ Douglass Papers. “God Almighty Made But One Race,” p. 145. *Washington Post*, January 26, 1884, p. 145.

D.C., when they met. After they married, their home became a haven for women from around the country and the world: a host to the National Woman Suffrage Association meetings throughout the 1880s, and the 1888 International Council of Women (at which the senior Douglass was praised by Susan B. Anthony as a women's rights pioneer). To his credit, Douglass was not content to rest upon his "race record," as other leaders were increasingly doing. But as Douglass neglected his role as race leader, a new generation at the turn of the century would fill the void. Race would become central to these "race men" - as Hazel Carby has characterized Booker T. Washington, Alain Locke, and W.E.B. DuBois, who would make the color line synonymous with twentieth-century black intellectual thought.¹¹ But that thought was also aligned with war and prosperity. It was, in fact, Washington who first connected the New Negro with American imperialism abroad during the Spanish American War (see his *New Negro for a New Century*). And DuBois would affix New Negro consciousness to the jingoist frenzy of World War I. For Alain Locke progressive black intellectual thought became part of the measured, artistic mood of "Americanization."

Douglass believed, somewhat naively, in the notion that "there is no division of races." But he also was speaking to the future, a time in which

the varieties of races will be blended into one. Let us look back when the black and the white people were distinct in this country. In two hundred and fifty years there has grown up a million of intermediate. And this will continue.

This was a difficult position to unravel, since it was at the center of the abolitionist cause. But Douglass also spoke to a time in which the cultural contribution would matter more

¹¹ Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men: The W.E.B. DuBois Lectures*. Harvard U P, 1998. To his benefit, DuBois

than the race of an artist. He forecasted that "the Negro in one form or complexion or another may be counted upon as a permanent element in the composition of the American population of the United States."¹²

Douglass, like his contemporary in Camden, Walt Whitman - spoke to future generations. But unlike Whitman, the abolitionist was more sensitive to an international "predicament" that would not be remedied by mere American capital and creativity. Instead of one gigantic American mosaic, Douglass saw the inevitability of a culture of exile, nurtured in uprootedness, classlessness, migration, and revolution, one that McKay would write about, as its poet laureate. Douglass identified himself as a part of this mongrelized race.

When lightning shall take the place of steam, as it will do, just as steam has taken the place of wind, when men shall navigate the air just as freely as they now navigate the sea, travel will cease to be the exclusive privilege of the few and the wealthy. It will be the privilege of the humblest laborer as well. When all this shall come to pass, he, too, will take his trip around the world. Things have much improved in this respect already. The time was when a poor man seldom found means of getting twenty miles from the smoke of his own chimney, but that day has passed and has passed forever, and the poor man can now travel far beyond his former limits.¹³

This uprootedness, for Douglass at least, arises out of his own experiences and struggles against America's plantation culture, which sustained segregation and dependence. Robert Butler notes,

As Douglass comes to understand slavery, he realizes that one of its most crippling features was the intense fear of movement induced in American slaves because they were usually equated motion with being separated from family and friends

criticized the fiction of race in 1915 in *The Negro*.

¹² "The Future of the Negro," in *North American Review*, July 1884.

¹³ During his 1886 tour of England, Ireland, France, Italy, and Egypt, in "My Travels Abroad, p. 5. Frederick Douglass Papers.

and then being sold to plantation owners of the “far South” where slavery took especially harsh forms.¹⁴

Douglass saw the slave’s condition as “fixed,” with no goal or choice. He “must take his root there or nowhere.” His going out into the “world,” as the abolitionist saw it, “was like a man going into the tomb who, with open eyes, sees himself buried out of sight and hearing of wife, children, and friends of kindred tie.” Within the cityscape, the psychological bonds that connected Douglass to the “old master” were forever broken.¹⁵ This new space afforded Douglass a world of possibilities. Thus, Douglass viewed uprootedness as the antithesis to oppression, and celebrated cosmopolitanism, hybridity, and diaspora as rich personal attributes. “To be able to appreciate what may be seen and learned in Europe, one must have seen and learned something in America,” he remarked.¹⁶

Douglass looked fondly upon a folk vernacular, although he may have been too much of a Victorian to become a proponent of “the primitive.” Like other internationalists, he knew the faults in essentializing race. Others, however, would glorify the primitive, such as Alain Locke, Albert Barnes, Vachel Lindsay, and others. Douglass, instead, viewed his place – and purpose – transnationally:

I saw in France and Italy the wisdom of Africa and the social disposition of Africans imitated; in the custom of the people to congregate at night in towns, villages and hamlets, while they had their living by tilling the soil far away. Farm houses exist but they are few and far between. Beautiful fields and vineyards may be seen on all sides, but you look in vain amid these fields and vineyards, for all

¹⁴ Robert Butler, “The City as Liberating Space in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*,” *The City in African American Literature*. Ed. Yoshinobu Hazkatuni and Robert Butler. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995, pp. 26.

¹⁵ *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, p. 97, qtd. in Butler, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶ Douglass Papers. “My Travels Abroad,” p. 5.

the houses of the people who till them. The village has taken the place of the farmhouse, and the peasants sometimes go several miles to their fields and vineyards.¹⁷

Douglass' internationalism, honed in the abolition "cause," crossed national boundaries to become a singular expression of civil rights and self-determination. His cultural work was to keep the suffrage ideal alive – to remind others that it was not solely a woman's issue, and that its legacy was cultural, political, and social. Thus, he saw the potential of its unity, which

rises superior to time and space, it overleaps and overlaps all geographical lines, and delimits all national boundaries. It is confined neither to clime, race, nor color, but in the common right of all nations, kindred, tongues and peoples. In its broad, beneficent spirit, prejudice, narrowness, race-hate and slavery skulk away abashed in their congenial regions of darkness, where they belong, and a man's country becomes the world, and his countrymen, all mankind. Therefore, whether among the snows of Russia, or the blazing heat of the sunny tropics; whether in one country or another, no matter in what latitude, longitude or altitude; the blood stained lash has been snatched from the hand of the cruel taskmaster; no matter where or when the fetters of the slave have been broken; and the appeals of the oppressed and suffering men for justice have been heard and heeded, joy and gladness may properly break forth from the quivering lips of all mankind.¹⁸

Against those numbers, all forms of government and business interests weakened. "The dignity of the anti-slavery movement," he observed,

does not become manifest when it is viewed merely apart and distinctly by itself as an isolated movement. It must be looked at as a part of that eternal and universal conflict everywhere in progress between human justice, enlightenment and goodness on the one hand, and human pride, selfishness, injustice and tyrannical power on the other; a conflict which has gone on from the beginning and which must go on forever until, by truth and love, the baser nature of man shall be subdued and refined and become subject to his higher and better nature.¹⁹

¹⁷ "My Trip Abroad," p. 3.

¹⁸ "Great Britain's Example Is High, Noble, and Grand: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 6 August, 1885," *Rochester Herald*, August 7, 1885; 194.

¹⁹ "The Greatest Revolution the world has yet seen: An address delivered in providence, Rhode Island, on 3 December 1884" *Boston Women's Journal* 13 December 1884; p. 200

Douglass viewed this work, therefore, as against a type of "Empire." Ireland's right to self-determination, for instance, became essential for Douglass – indeed, for many internationalists, such as McKay, the Eastmans, the Pankhursts, and others – and provided continuity across "racial divides" in which Ireland was characterized as the only "white" nation "left under the yoke of foreign imperialism."²⁰ The issue for them was not white or black, but hegemonic or counter-hegemonic resistance. The "eyes of the subject races are fixed on Ireland," noted McKay, reflecting a Douglass sentiment, which would unite the two thinkers across oceans, temperaments, and conditions. Both Douglas and McKay made no excuses for England's tarnished civil rights record. "To the internationalist," McKay pointed out, "it seems evident that the dissolution of the British Empire and the ushering in of the era of proletarian states, will give England her proper proportional place in the political affairs of the world" (Cooper, *Passion* 61). Douglass, too, was critical, but obsequious (England, he always was reminded, provided him with safe haven during American's notorious Fugitive Slave Act years). But later when he met with Irish parliament members Arthur O'Connor and Thomas H. Grattan Esmonde, and U.S. Congressmen – a meeting that was roundly condemned by English leaders – he was disappointed.

This is not my hour. England does not want to know what Frederick Douglass has to say on the subject of Home rule for Ireland. . . . When we had the great battle with slavery, why, they welcomed Frederick Douglass, and they welcomed any and every other man who came there to ask their sympathy in behalf of the cause of liberty, and you only do the same here. There is no such thing as limiting the spirit of liberty. Liberty! Why it is like the sun in the heavens – it shines for all. National lines, geographical lines, do not and cannot confine it. It belongs to the whole world, and the whole world has a right to stand up in its behalf . . . for when

²⁰ Wayne Cooper, *The Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 58.

it is struck down in one direction it is struck down in another and in all directions.²¹

Douglass empathized with “the bitter anguish of an Irish emigrant” who saw, with sadness, “one after another of the familiar hills and mountains of his beloved native land sink below the distant horizon.”²² Even though he agitated for Irish home rule, he steered a steady course *against* national policy, eventually upsetting government leaders and business interests here and abroad.²³ (Even in his capacity as consul general to Haiti and charge d'affaires to the Dominican Republic in 1889 Douglass adhered to his job as “agitator,” which he believed offered a quicker resolution to social ills.)²⁴

On February 20, 1895, the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C., gave him a standing ovation – on the very day he died. It would be a blessing, as the issues the NCW worked on included the rising tide of war and race-gender discrimination. Whether self-determination (as with Ireland) or suffrage, Douglass’ presence was a continual reminder to fellow abolitionists and a younger generation of internationalists of “the incompleteness of our work” in the years and decades ahead.²⁵

²¹ *Frederick Douglass Papers*, pp. 273-277

²² “Thoughts and Recollections of a Trip in Ireland, 1886.”

²³ Douglass’ support of home rule was at a time that the U.S. government was attempting to negotiate a trade agreement with Canada.

²⁴ Douglass was a firm believer in agitation. He once explained his reasons for lecturing: “I was compelled to comply by three reasons: First, I believe in the cause of woman; second, because I believe in agitation; and third, because I gratefully appreciate the services rendered by women to the cause of emancipation” (“Woman Suffrage” 1).

²⁵ *Frederick Douglass Paper*, ed. John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan and Peter P. Hinks. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999.

THE DOUGLASS MOMENTUM INCUBATED IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY among disenchanted radicals, such as Crystal Eastman, who were direct descendants of abolition and suffrage.¹ Eastman and others, in this Douglass tradition, inaugurated a new phase of internationalist feminism that rallied artists and workers, students and migrants. It would be the “soil” upon which Claude McKay’s poetics flourished

Eastman was a brilliant organizer and strategist for the cause. She graduated NYU Law School and completed a degree in social work at Columbia, where she met Paul U. Kellogg, the editor of *Survey Graphic*, the journal that inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro esthetics. He mentored her in the ways of Fabian radicalism, much as Olivier influenced McKay. Deeply touched by the suffrage tradition, particularly Douglass, she easily embraced the nineteenth-century abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison’s “doctrine of nonresistance,” and devoted her life to pacifism and feminism. When she considered names for a new radical magazine, to be co-edited by her and brother, Max Eastman (and later, Floyd Dell, Claude McKay, Art Young, and Mike Gold), Garrison’s crusading

¹ Eastman’s mother, Annis, who worked with Douglass, was also a strong proponent of suffrage in the late nineteenth century. She studied theology at Oberlin College (one of the first women to do so), and became involved with Thomas K. Beecher’s Park Church in Elmira, New York, which was founded as an abolitionist church after it broke with its more traditional Presbyterian congregation (O’Neill, *Last Romantic* 5). The congregation was an important connection for the underground railroad network and provided funds and a meeting space for such controversial leaders as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and, of course, Frederick Douglass. Annis, as pastor, was also invited to speak at the World’s Congress of Religions in Chicago during the Columbia Exposition in 1893, where she met with Douglass and the feminist Ida B. Wells, who were distributing an angry message to exposition visitors in their co-authored protest pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbia Exposition*. Douglass admired Eastman’s energy, and referred to her along with other women internationalists, such as Lucy Stone, Mary Ashton Livermore, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These women, he noted in a lecture in Boston on May 24, 1886, spoke with more self-possession and assurance than “the most eloquent and able speakers in Congress” (“Woman Suffrage,” May 24, 1886, p. 3). In 1910, at the age of 55, with her children already immersed in New York’s feminist and radical circles, she embarked on a new career in reform politics. She died that same year. Mary Ashton Livermore (1820-1905) was another social reformer, who authored *What Shall We Do with Our Daughters?* (1883).

Liberator immediately came to mind. She was also a close acquaintance of Fanny Garrison Villard's, another abolitionist legacy child, the daughter of William Lloyd Garrison. Along with 50 women radicals, the two greeted Jane Addams – called the most dangerous woman in America by the Daughters of the American Revolution – on her triumphant return to New York from the famous Hague Congress of 1915. That was an important moment for the suffrage-abolitionist tradition, and united two significant causes. It also ushered in the era of the Women's Peace Party and the more militant tactics of direct action – somewhat in the mold of the Douglass agitator.² It is not coincidence that the Women's Peace Party continued on this legacy that began with Douglass and Susan B. Anthony in 1845. The WPP convened in January 1915, and Eastman worked at making it a political force that also expressed “a woman's protest.”³ She reflected all these traditions in a July 24, 1915, letter to *The New Republic*.

Beyond advocating what is an inherent and inevitable part of the pacifist platform, i.e., a non-aggressive national policy, it is not necessary for the peace movement to concern itself in the first instance with questions of international policy. National disputes will arise – they are unavoidable – so long as separate nations exist. Our concern is with the method of settling those disputes. Our function is to establish new values.

There are clear echoes of Douglass here. Eastman also urged readers to “start the political genius of the world thinking, inventing, along this line.” She was adamant that “pacifist agitation,” as she called it, should not concern itself with “questions of purely national policy.”⁴ While Rosika Schwimmer and English pacifist Ethel Snowden, part of a

² *New York Herald Tribune*, July 6, 1915. A workaholic, Crystal Eastman did not attend the conference, saying that there was too much work to be done in the United States.

³ Crystal Eastman to Jane Addams, June 28, 1917. *Woman's Peace Party Correspondence*, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁴ Qtd. in Cook, *Crystal Eastman: On Women and Revolution*, pp. 235, 236.

delegation representing “war-suffering mothers of Europe,” brought their message of mediation to the White House, for instance, Eastman instead led mass demonstrations outside its gates. Her extraordinary energy, what her friend, the poet Claude McKay, called “a state of high tension,” made the WPP into “one of the most vital and successful peace organizations during the war.”⁵ With her efforts, the organization had a tremendous influence, particularly when the United States briefly went to war with Mexico (a prelude to WWI), and after, in advocating for an international commission for peace, which would eventually be adopted by the U.S. as a model for the League of Nations. In 1917, following a speech by Eastman at a “New York Mother’s Day” rally, Eastman urged that “not a foot of territory or a dollar” be given over to war, and a resolution soon followed condemning militarism (Craig 373-393). Eastman saw her work, again, as “the pacifist’s task.” More specifically, her work involved the elimination of conscription, which she (and other radicals, like the Fabians) equated with a slave system.⁶ She asked, “But what shall we do, meanwhile, about the growing demand for compulsory military training and service in this country? – a demand stimulated by the self-interest of capitalists, imperialists, and war traders?”

We must make this great American democracy know, as we know, that military training is bad for the bodies and minds and souls of boys; that free minds, and souls, undrilled to obedience are vital to the life of democracy. We must make them see the difference between equality and freedom; if forced military service is “democratic,” in the same sense prison life is democratic.⁷

⁵ McKay to Ogden, October 2, 1921. William Ready. John M. Craig, “The Women’s Peace Party and Questions of Gender Separatism,” in *Peace & Change* 19:4 (October 1994), p. 373-399.

⁶ The Fabians made just such an evaluation in 1900. See “Army Reform” in *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto by the Fabian Society*, pp. 38-44.

⁷ Brother Max Eastman was not as committed. His biographer, William L. O’Neill, points out, “Strictly speaking, Eastman was not a pacifist,” although he was opposed to the war machinery that was built upon

The Women's Party united a diverse group of radical women, from traditional suffragettes, such as Fanny Villard, to the more militant Jane Addams, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Rosa Pastors Stokes. More importantly, the Women's Party also became involved in labor issues and helped to organize a defense committee when dock workers, such as Patrick Quinlan, or others, were arrested for union activities.⁸ In addition to her many hats, Eastman also served as executive director of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), founded by Lillian Wald, Oswald Garrison Villard, and others, and its first action was to lobby against a war with Mexico in 1916. It also campaigned against the draft, arms profiteering, U. S. military adventures in Latin America and the Caribbean, and of course U.S. entry into WWI. Eastman used all these groups to advocate for the defense of civil liberties, especially during wartime when censorship became an issue, and championed the rights of dissenters and conscientious objectors. No doubt she was a counsel to her brother when he and others were placed on trial.⁹ In April 1917, assisted by Roger

nationalism and patriotism. (see O'Neill, *The Last Romantic: A Life of Max Eastman*, p. 60). During World War II, Dwight Macdonald would criticize Eastman for his new-found patriotism (see Macdonald "Kultur bolschewismus Is Here" *Partisan Review*, Nov.-Dec. 1941, pp. 442-43; "Max Eastman's New Faith" *New Internationalist*, June 1941, p. 101. "In My Opinion," which appeared in the *New Leader* (April 17, 1943, p. 1). Eastman explained: "The contrast in this respect with World War I is startling. That disaster to mankind was widely greeted as a grand adventure. It started off, as all wars had, with fifes and glory-drums, with ringside shouts and exultation oratory. We who opposed it often felt more like wet blankets than dissenters; we were spoiling all the fun." Later he opposed the Vietnam war, but not the anti-communist campaign of the 1950s. After Crystal Eastman's sudden death of kidney failure in 1928 at the age of 53, who seemed to be his political backbone, Max Eastman went along a more conventional route. (O'Neill 60).

⁷ O'Neill, p. 73

⁸ Crystal Eastman thanked Stokes for contributing to the Quinlan Defense Fund, in a letter dated January 19, 1916. Rosa Pastor Stokes Archives, Tamiment Library, New York University. In 1921, the WPP was renamed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which is today the nation's oldest women's peace organization.

⁹ *The Masses* became the prime outlet for antiwar sentiment and a target of government censorship. After January 1916, the Eastmans most active year of anti-war activism so far, *The Masses* was barred from subway newsstands. In 1917, the Post Office Department prohibited the periodical from mail delivery. Even some of its regular subscribers had begun writing in to complain of the magazine's irreverency with regard to the war.

Baldwin and Norman Thomas, she established the National Civil Liberties Bureau (NCLB). (And in 1920 she joined with Baldwin and Thomas, again, along with Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, Felix Frankfurter, Oswald Garrison Villard, Paul Underwood Kellogg, Clarence Darrow, John Dewey, Charles Beard, Abraham Muste, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Upton Sinclair to form the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which still exists to fight those battles of civil rights violations that are prevalent in times of crisis or war, as in the World Trade Center aftermath.

Eastman would eventually settle in England with her husband, the poet and pacifist Walter Fuller, soon after the vote in the United States was achieved, and where work in England was still needed. As she noted later in a *Tide and Tide* article (July 20, 1923), "American women owe much to the English militants," particularly in providing the training for Alice Paul's Congressional assault for the vote, which included picketing the White House, hunger strikes, and burning the president's war speeches. She contributed to *Time and Tide*, the feminist journal, and devoted her energies, again, to achieving full suffrage for women, this time in England and the colonies. "The women's program is by no means achieved in England," she explained of her mission. Even when Crystal Eastman limited her editorial activities as managing editor so she could devote time to work with her husband on the pacifist journal *The Freeman*, in February of 1921, she made sure that

But the editors were undaunted, and continued to publish issues for September, October, and then a final one for November/December, before the government brought the editors to court on sedition charges. One of the last issues to be published was a harbinger of *The Masses* demise. In "One Solid Month of Liberty," which appeared in September 1917, John Reed catalogued a series of events that forecasted the rise of nationalism and war: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman sent to prison; eighteen periodicals, including the *Masses*, denied mailing privileges; a socialist parade had been mobbed in Boston; the East St. Louis race riots occurred; hundreds of striking miners were kidnapped at gunpoint in Bisbee, Arizona and

her protégé Claude McKay, along with Floyd Dell, whose international views on feminism she admired, shared editorial decisions with Max, who was becoming disturbingly enamoured of Marx and Lenin. Before she left New York, Eastman expressed her anxieties to McKay; increasingly she felt that there was no place for her and her politics, and was apprehensive about leaving.¹⁰

Both she and McKay were of the same mind, and McKay eventually traveled to England, at Crystal Eastman's behest, and was introduced to Sylvia Pankhurst and C.K. Ogden. While in New York, however, the two like-minded radicals considered each other comrades. They began socializing, and later became the center of an "incident" when the police broke up a *Liberator* benefit, beating up several guests and arresting others, in the summer of 1922. McKay commented on the raid, inscribing the dance floor with a specific horror and violation.

I think the persons who invented discrimination in public places to ostracize people of a different race or nation or color or religion are the direct descendants of medieval torturers. It is the most powerful instrument in the world that may be employed to prevent *reproachement* and understanding between different groups of people. It is the cancer in the universal human body and poison to the individual soul.¹¹

dump in the desert; Suffrage pickets were mobbed in Washington and then arrested and jailed; and, of course, the beginnings of Soviet Communism.

¹⁰ McKay wrote to C.K. Ogden, the English editor, in October 1921, that Fuller was unhappy and planning to move to England. Eastman was having a second child, and "terribly unsettled," he told him. (McKay to Ogden, October 2, 1921. William Ready.) Eastman continued as a contributing editor at *The Liberator*. At the same time as Fuller and Crystal Eastman's departure, Max planned a trip to Russia and, bypassing Dell, made Mike Gold and McKay executive editors. Max Eastman probably thought he was wedding the new proletarian politics with the New Negro outlook, but it was an unworkable relationship for everyone. Dell and McKay, who were of similar minds, were unable to work with Gold, and McKay resigned a year later in June 1922. That was the end of the free-spirited journal. In October 1924, with Gold still at the helm, *The Liberator* merged with *The Labor Herald* and *Soviet Russian Pictorial* to become *The Workers Monthly*. (See Floyd Dell, by John E. Hart, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1971.)

¹¹ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 135-37.

But it would be one of the last moments together. Politics may have been the reasons for the raid, but McKay believed it was due to his *close dancing* with a white woman outside of a Harlem cabaret context. It was, for all purposes, too shockingly real. "The New York papers had made quite a scandal of it," he explained later.¹² Their many other encounters, however, may have inspired the poem "The Barrier."¹³

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illuminated way;

I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river-reed,
Comes from your trembling throat;

I must not see upon your face
Love's softly glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark.¹⁴

McKay thought that Crystal – a towering figure at six feet – was "the most beautiful white woman I had ever know."¹⁵ On McKay's last night in New York before he left for Russia in 1922, they were to have dinner together, but missed each other. Crystal left a note, saying that she dropped by to "give you a hug and say goodbye."¹⁶ McKay wrote affectionately in "The City's Love":

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,

¹² McKay to Cunard, September 18, 1932, Harry Ransom.

¹³ "The Barrier" first appeared in the July 1919 issue of *The Liberator*, and later in *Cambridge Magazine*.

¹⁴ This poem, which reflects the insurmountable barriers of race between loved ones, was not included in the 1920 edition *Spring in New Hampshire* nor the companion 1922 edition, *Harlem Shadows*. It did appear in the posthumous *Selected*, which was edited by Max Eastman. All the indentations are eliminated in the 1953 version, which was edited by Max Eastman.

¹⁵ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

The gracious city swept across the line;
Oblivious of the color of my skin,
Forgetting that I was an alien guest,
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast.
The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,
Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove.

Eastman's move to England was also a way to pay a political debt. From Sylvia Pankhurst's mother, Emmeline, Eastman had cut her teeth on "direct action." To the young Eastman, the elder Pankhurst's speech before a crowd of thousands in 1909 made an impression, particularly when she noted:

It is unendurable to think of another generation of women wasting their lives
begging for the vote. We must not lose any more time. We must act.¹⁷

Eastman and Sylvia were of that generation. On the same page in which *The New York Times* reviewed Pankhurst's speech was a sidebar that announced the Men's League, which was coincidentally spearheaded by Crystal Eastman's brother, Max.¹⁸ It seemed like a battle strategy working at two fronts – from two families, the Eastmans and Pankhursts – on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁹ Interestingly, McKay was their shared literary prize.

Soon women internationalists began referring to themselves as simply *internationalists*, transforming Douglass' hopes of a feminist vanguard into a reality. McKay,

¹⁷ Quoted in Mary Davis, *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics*, p.21. (See Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, Virago, 1979.) The Eastmans' political commitments and Pankhursts' American debut reflected a new strategy in the women's suffrage movement. Speaking before more than 1,000 women at the Hudson Theatre in New York City, Pankhurst noted that "The movement in this country will become widespread, even more so than in England." She also observed that American suffragettes have yet to learn how to become practical politicians, an issue the Men's League would explore in its pamphlet "Is Woman Suffrage Important," published in 1912. (See *The New York Times*, November 30, 1909, p. 5)

¹⁸ Richard, father of Christabel and Sylvia and Emmeline's husband, a Fabian socialist and reformer, was instrumental in starting the British League several years earlier, along with Jacob Bright, a Quaker abolitionist. Much like its British counterpart, the New York League reflected the abolitionist and suffrage spirit, and viewed suffrage – much as Douglass did – as central to social progress.

too, was aware of this radical realignment of the suffrage movement, and observed:

During the period of Reconstruction, a goodly number went from New England to educate the freedmen, and, although they were socially ostracized by the Southerners, they stood their guns. Today they are needed more than ever. The call is loud and the cause is great.²⁰

In McKay's poem, "The Conqueror" for instance – against which these new internationalist must struggle – a disembodied "He" battles earth, air, and sea – but remains tormented, unable to tame "his" soul. There are no geographic or racial markers in the poem, and thus McKay's rage is defused. But the repetitive "He" is incessant, and has the rhythm of a mantra:

He has battled with Earth:
He has won;
Where once there was desert and dearth,
And jungles untouched by the sun,
Are altar and field and hearth:
He has fought the wild earth,
He has won.

He has conquered the Sea:
Proud he rides
Over the long white waves,
Over the frenzied graves
Of creatures that fought, as he,
The great Sea.

And he goes through the Air
On wings.
He has won everywhere,
He has under control
Earth, Sea, and Air,
Yea, all things
But his Soul.

"Over the long white waves" of imperialism, the poet struggles to keep his "soul" – the

¹⁹ Christabel Parkhurst, for instance, also associated the formation of the influential Women's Social and Political Union to the arrival in England of the American Susan B. Anthony in 1903, which is another example of cross-cultural radical politics at work during the early twentieth century.

Fabian socialist traditions he acquired in his childhood. Soul to a poet, learned in Romantic and Renaissance symbolism, is a characteristic of femaleness. In the fractured English traditions that McKay acquired as a colonial reading Elizabethan dramas, soul also meant balance and cultural integrity. The poet implies that balance – spiritually, psychically, socially – for our conqueror would require a more feminized soul. The poem also has an anonymity to it – the trademark of a poet who breached racial and sexual identities. In fact, the poet's America period is distinctly marked by this struggle for a lyrical voice.²¹ "The Conqueror" has the same tone of disembodiment, for instance, as McKay's poem "If We Must Die," written around the same time. But unlike those "hunted and penned in an inglorious spot" that confines "If We Must Die," McKay instead reverses the gaze outward to become the very thing itself – a tortured imperialist "riding the long white waves" of Western patriarchy. (It is interesting that Phillis Wheatley used the same image of waves and ocean to chronicle the Middle Passage in "Ocean.") The waves carry one in search of lasting meaning in a turbulent world, and mirrors the poet's own struggles, as a colonial, against modernity. For McKay and others of the diaspora, whether Aimé Césaire or Ngugi wa Thiongo, "soul" has very specific connotations of "blackness" and is the very portal to identity and wholeness, in which disalienation moves one along

²⁰ McKay, "Socialism and the Negro," *Dreadnought*, Jan. 31, 1920.

²¹ "Harlem Dancer," for instance, was first published under the pen name Eli Edwards in *Seven Arts*; the grouping that appeared in *Pearson's* was sent earlier to Stanley Braithwaite, under the pseudonym Rhonda Hope, and McKay assumed "an almost girlish tone and shyness and hesitancy" in dealing with the Boston editor. Wayne Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, p.78. Braithwaite was poetry editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, when McKay sent him a sampling in January 1916. More importantly, McKay chose female pseudonyms for those poems in which a clear "racial" or "male" imprint would interfere with the message: in the more autobiographical poems, those written in Jamaica and New York, he uses his real name; those written formally, whether in a proletarian or English literary tradition, such as those published while he lived in English during the 1920s, he preferred anonymity.

toward reintegration.²² As “He” becomes more power-drunk in a quest for supremacy, the connections to the things that matter to “Him” are trivialized.

The female (or victim stance) is also a found in McKay’s first attempts at “Harlem poems,” such as “Harlem Dancer” (written under the pseudonym Eli Edwards) and “Harlem Shadows.” What impressed McKay about Harlem – a place claimed by Alain Locke as the “Cultural Capital” of the diaspora – was its “shadow” world that fueled the burlesque and honky-tonk nightlife. The poem “Harlem Shadows,” like McKay’s other poems, is about the margins of race and gender (those sinister and revolutionary corners, what he called society’s taboos). A more important theme, however, was this binary relationship – the “white” men who are involved with war, and the “shadow” industries (colonial, women, the poor) that cater to them. The poet uses an English lyrical image, that of Wordsworth’s heroic Scottish “lass” (“The Solitary Reaper,” another of the disenfranchised, who speaks “of battles long ago,” in an indecipherable language, across geography). But that allusion is used to frame a hardened urban cabaret worker. She, like McKay and the Scottish lass, speaks of “far-off things.”

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire’s call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth’s white breast,

²² “There will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things, in the materialistic meaning of the world, will have been restored to their proper places.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967).

The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,

The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

McKay skillfully re-invents a Romantic poem within a modernist, postcolonial paradigm. This was a unique quality, and understood by other colonials, such as his editor and publisher at *Pearson's Magazine*, the Irish nationalist Frank Harris, who found McKay's poems extraordinary. The country "lass" is part of the "sacred brown feet of my fallen race." But she has those same heroic qualities as her Scottish counterpart. The "lay" that Wordsworth is charmed by, but cannot understand, is one audible to our Harlem lass. More importantly, McKay does not judge this Harlem woman's work. A hard task during a time of the Mannes Act and the so-called white slave trade. Is McKay obliquely making comment on society's inattention to the *black* female slave trade, one wonders? ²³ Feet become, for McKay, like Spanish Needles, and are the same in Harlem as the countryside. It is not only a diasporic moment for McKay, but a trans-Atlantic one as well, linking colonial and colonizer. The "halting footsteps" of our Harlem lass interrupts the "solitary Highland Lass." Instead of a lass on a windy hilltop "Reaping and singing," however, McKay describes "the shapes of girls who pass/To bend and barter at desire's call." The

²³ The white slave trade, as it was called, was going on at the same time that the lynchings of blacks were rampant through the country. The trade in female flesh reached such proportions that the U.S. Congress enacted the Mann Act in 1910, which prohibited the transportation of females across state or international borders for immoral purposes. McKay was aware of the paradox and irony that drove women to the margins. While society opposed prostitution, it was encouraged by maintaining racial and sexual barriers, and by not paying fair wages to women.

poem also echoes William Blake's dainty imagery of "slipperd feet," but against "the veil" of "Negro Harlem" as it is lowered in dawn's early twilight. Pastoral elements in the poem are tightly compressed within an anonymity that reflects the urban modernist condition. Yet McKay (and, I might venture, Wordsworth) reveal little of their lass's identity. As the first Harlem poem, McKay's only mention of color is *brown*, which to him has more importance political meaning: it connects to the earth, the pastoral tradition of Wordsworth, and to his home in Jamaica, where women were less of outcasts. ("Negro" here is used more as a geographic marker by the poet to denote the contours of this industry in Harlem, such as we find in the poem "Negro Dancers.") McKay clearly locates "Negro" as uniquely American. Finally, there is the fetishizing of feet, which connotes acculturation and elasticity (and, given McKay's early trek in the jungle and mountaintops of Jamaica, one wonders if there is a connection to his mentor Walter Jekyll, who was an avid walker). The poet calls them the "heart of me," these "feet of clay" – so simply made of earth yet, when molded, are beautifully complex, unlike the "vile clay" of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Mask." The poem begins in "Negro" Harlem, but ends in a more sinister "Harlem" (the internationalist marketplace where imperialism and war are encountered). In such a place, one easily loses group identity. McKay would continue his exploration of dancers and the significance of the dance floor in the unpublished "Romance in Marseilles" and other poems such as the sonnet "The Negro Dancers." His keen interest was motivated, in part, by that police raid on the *Liberator* dance floor. Yet it has its own ideology and rules. "What I feel most when I am dancing is the desire for a perfect unity of

movement with my partner," remarked McKay.²⁴

But here, in the compact world of "Negro" Harlem, McKay pulls and tugs at boundaries, perceptions, and identity. He also enacts the dance floor as an arena of human struggle (much as the police raid intruded upon McKay's personal life). The conventional sonnet form was popular among feminists and working-class writers at the turn of the century who were schooled in mastering the form, but who used it for their own ends. Most notable were the pacifist and feminist poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and the English poets who published in the 4 *Wheels* anthologies (1915-1921). Millay, for instance, was less concerned with breaking form, as with making powerful statements, which she felt could only be achieved with a fine, lyrical voice. Countee Cullen, another fine lyrical poet, used the conventional forms in conveying a subtle racial subtext. McKay is more playful and experimental, concerned with word meanings and stereotyped perceptions. Substituting "blacks" for "masses," or inverting positions of power; stretching metaphors and tropes. Within the tight Shakespearean sonnet form, McKay devised an oral "call and response" technique: the first sets up the situation; the second provides an answer. Much as Shakespeare used it, McKay's response (the end turn, or finishing couplet) is shrouded in word play and conundrum.

"The Negro Dancers" has a softer, more lyrical quality than his other political poems, and is the exception to the general themes of war and greed that are found in the "The Little Peoples," "The Capitalist at Dinner," and "If We Must Die" that make up a

²⁴ McKay to Harold Jackman, May 9, 1928. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

collection titled "Songs and Sonnets."²⁵ Like "Harlem Shadows," there is a sharp critique of the cultural industry in America – and Harlem in particular – that used race to market exotic entertainment. Oddly, it was not one of McKay's favorite poems. He did not "consider the poem up to the level of my other work" he wrote Locke in 1926 from Marseilles. When Locke scrambled to expand the revised edition of *New Negro*, he discovered "The Negro Dancers" in the July 1919 issue of *The Liberator*. Locke disagreed, and published the poem without the author's consent. McKay accused Locke of breaking up "the artistic pattern that I have been trying to work out. I cannot understand why you have done it," he wrote, and requested that Locke remove the poem from any future editions and to substitute others.²⁶ That, of course, was never done – since the two had a falling out over other editorial changes as well.²⁷ The dancers in the poem evoke an artificial terrain much like that in "Harlem Dancer," and McKay may have had intentions to publish it in a future collection of poems, since it was part of an unpublished manuscript "New Poems," under the heading "Harlem."²⁸ While Locke thought that the poem embodied the new racial spirit, McKay felt otherwise. It was a site of black performativity – and struggle. In fact, the poem can be read *against* Harlem and the New Negro.

Untypical of his two-stanza sonnet style, "The Negro Dancers" is in three parts, with the final stanza revealing what William Stanley Braithwaite has called "a spiritual

²⁵ The collection appeared in *The Liberator*, July 1919.

²⁶ McKay to Locke, August 1, 1926. Quoted in Wayne Cooper, *The Passion of Claude McKay*, pp. 143-144.

²⁷ Locke caved into the political climate at the time when McKay insisted on using the title "The White House" as a symbol of imperialism and abuse Locke changed the title to "White Houses." The perspective, of course, was important for McKay, who saw "racism" as more monolithic and state-sponsored.

mystery.” The first movement describes a world of shadows, in which there is little pleasure and all is routine. The second stanza adds the poet as observer who sees a “dead earth” that is briefly awoken. The final section, very much echoing the anger found in “If We Must Die,” finds solace in dance, a trope used in other McKay poems as well as in WWI verse written around this time. The “dance,” then, becomes a distraction from the pursuit of violence; for McKay it is a safe zone. He writes:

No faith is theirs. No shining ray of hope,
Except the martyr’s faith, the hope that death
Some day will free them from their narrow scope
And once more merge them with the infinite breath.

And then, notes admiringly: “But, oh! They dance with poetry in their eyes.” But we are left with a feeling of a desolate performance: “Whose dreamy loveliness no sorrow dims.” The final movement detaches this class of “Negroes” from a larger diaspora – of blackness, of connectedness to a race, as Van Wyck Brooks once noted, based on common oppression. It ends

The gifts divine are theirs, music and laughter;
All other things, however great, come after

This “world of shadows” is not specific to a geographic area, although it conjures images of Harlem and its seemingly “glorious” energy. It, Instead, reflects a universal predicament. As one of McKay’s more lyrical and balanced works, it was, wisely, included in his first collection of poems, *Spring in New Hampshire*, published in England in 1920. That collection would mark the beginning of McKay’s lyrical voice, one which he muted – or, more likely, was urged to mute – by American editors. “The Negro Dancers” views

²⁸ “New Poems,” in the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

identity – and blackness – as a series of cultural performances, and its theme of the dance floor one that runs throughout McKay's work.

Although "Negro Dancers" does not fit the "artistic pattern" of the other poems in *The Liberator* during this period (for instance, it never made it into *The Selected Poems*, a posthumous collection, but that had more to do with Max Eastman's editorial biases), the poem does provide thematic continuity with McKay's *internationalist* aesthetics – so I find it hard to believe McKay wanted to eliminate the poem from all future collections. One explanation might be that McKay did not want the poem to be misinterpreted as a celebration of cabaret nightlife.

For instance, when "Harlem Dancer" first appeared in the October 1918 issue of *Seven Arts* under the pen name Eli Edwards, Braithwaite proclaimed McKay to be "the keystone of the new movement in racial poetic achievement."²⁹ The pseudonym, Braithwaite conjectured, was an attempt to conceal the poet's identity "from the associates among whom he works for his daily bread," and had little bearing on the quality of the work (although McKay's shroudedness seemed to arouse Braithwaite's *sexual* curiosity). Braithwaite never mentions Harlem or the oppression of blacks or women in his discussion of the poem (all of which are interrelated in unique ways). Instead, he admired McKay's "ability to reproduce a hectic scene of reality with all the solid accessories" and "make it float as it were upon a background of illusion through which comes piercing the glowing sense of a spiritual mystery." The "hectic scene of reality" is coded to imply urban poverty, while "a background of illusion" is the false, mechanical performivity of the dancer. The

central concern of McKay's poem – exploitation of women – is politely overlooked, while Braithwaite observes that

the significance of the intoxicated figure with its sensuous contagion into something ultimate behind the 'falsely-smiling face,' where 'herself' – be it the innocent memory of childhood, perhaps of some pursuing dream of a brief happiness in love, or a far-away country home which her corybantic earnings secures in peace and comfort for the aged days of her parents – is inviolably wrapped in the innocence and beauty of her dreams

Braithwaite ends his analysis, instead, on a call for racial unity: "This sonnet differs in both visionary and artistic power from anything so far produced by the poets of the race." But Braithwaite has a different attitude toward McKay's more political stuff. In "The Negro in American Literature," which appeared in *New Negro*, McKay has become a poet enmeshed in a "dilemma . . . caught between the currents of the poetry of protest and the poetry of expression." He has become "a violent and strident propagandist, using his poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts." The "pure lyric dreamer" who contemplated "life and nature with a wistful sympathetic passion," Braithwaite noted sentimentally, "hovers for a moment, pardonably perhaps, over the race problem" – which Braithwaite equates with politics – "but its highest allegiance is to Poetry – it must soar." In such poems as "If We Must Die," Braithwaite saw McKay as too obsessed with "the race problem" (*New Negro* 40).

Even if we overlook Braithwaite's obvious prejudices, he still seems unable to grasp McKay's "alluring interest," placing him, instead, within a certain racial temperament and class-consciousness, that yet must, somehow, transcend appearances. Braithwaite's

²⁹ Braithwaite, "Some Contemporary Poetry of the Negro Race" in *The Crisis* 17:6 (April 1919), p. 275.

comments confirmed McKay's fears – the provincialism of black and white critics who were weighted with segregationist attitudes of the era: The Jim Crow double standard through which New (and Old) Negroes defined themselves. "The Negro Dancers" both responds to this type of race thinking as well as deconstructs the "background of illusion" upon which Harlem and its "New Negro" Renaissance rested, and is why he feared Locke's editorial manipulations. By limiting "Negro Dancers" availability to future readers, McKay worked out his dilemma with Braithwaite's (and Locke's) gross misinterpretations. It did not improve relations when Braithwaite's revised estimation appeared in Locke's already notorious and inflammatory *New Negro*. But it is a unifying poem on many levels that explores the relationship of "dance" to cultural production, and develops the trope of dance, which we find in "Harlem Dancer" and also in the novel, "Romance in Marseilles," one of McKay's last works of fiction written when the poet lived in North Africa. The poem's persona – as a detached transgendered cultural observer – is one that is used uniquely in McKay later poems, as well, during his travels through England, Europe, Spain, and North Africa. "Music" and "dance" were central to McKay, who saw it as liberating as well as oppressing. But the dance on all levels was part of the "primitivism" of WWI, with allusions to sacrifice, sex, rebirth. It is found in Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*. McKay sums of this mood in his novel *Banjo*:

Shake to the loud music of life playing to the primeval round of life. Rough rhythm of darkly-carnal life. Strong surging flux of profound currents forced into shallow channels. Play that thing! One movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow. Shake that thing! In the face of the shadow of Death.... Life over here! Shake down Death and forget his commerce, his purpose, his haunting presence in a great shaking orgy. Dance down the Death of these days, the Death of these ways in shaking that thing. Jungle jazzing, Orient wriggling, civilized stepping. Shake that thing! Sweet dancing thing of primitive joy, perverse pleasure, prostitute ways, many-colored variations of the rhythm, slaves, barbaric, refined, –

eternal rhythm of the mysterious, magical, magnificent – the dance divine of life...Oh, Shake That Thing! (58)

For McKay, dance became a signifier for – and an expression of – the folk esthetic, whether it involved Russian “sacrifice,” Jamaican peasants, or Harlem cabaret workers.

In fact, Harlem became important for McKay only after he traveled to Europe. He later remarked: “I was never happy in Harlem, but I was always excited, restless, and enjoyed the excitement.”³⁰ Harlem was too confining for McKay’s more expansive *internationalist* temperament, when many were busily reinventing ethnic and racial identities. While American writers of African descent spoke of a veil (DuBois) or a mask (Dunbar), the texture of McKay’s “shroud” was formed, in part, by the rich synthesis of traditions of the late nineteenth century. McKay refused to be limited by the place of one’s birth (as Max Eastman argued), and he *enjoyed* the margins. His view of “cultural capital,” proclaimed by Alain Locke in celebration of the cultural investment in Harlem and the New Negro, had less to do with racial unity. McKay’s restlessness was indicative of the modern colonial who felt privileged in calling on all traditions – English and American, Caribbean and African – in utilizing conventions from William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold to Jamaican folk tunes and the canon of African American writing, without forfeiting his identity to any of them. But McKay, like many writers of the diaspora, was also aware of the dilemma between group identity and individuality. “In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington,” one of his first poems written in America (interestingly, in Hanover, New Hampshire, where he worked at a resort), expresses an attempt at resolving this problem.

I vividly recall the noon-day hour
 You walked into the wide and well-filled hall:
 We rose and sang, at the conductor's call,
 Dunbar's Tuskegee hymn. A splendid tower ³¹
 Of strength, as would a gardener on the flower
 Nursed tenderly, you gazed upon us all
 Assembled there, a serried, sable wall
 Fast mortared by your subtle tact and power.
 O how I loved, adored your furrowed face!
 And fondly hoped, before your days were done,
 You would look in mine too with paternal grace.
 But vain are hopes and dreams! – gone: you are gone,
 And O! We feel so utterly alone.

McKay anguishes over this “racial” vision, and hopes for some acceptance. Instead, he is ignored. In his rejection (by a much-revered Washington and the tradition of African American writing), he feels “utterly alone.” Instead, he turns to images in his early pastoral poems, which were nurtured in Jamaica by the horticulturist Walter Jekyll, and sees himself, again, as “a gardener.” Thus, McKay works at *cultivating* an African American literary tradition that would accommodate his perspective. But he is denied the leader’s “paternal grace.” Within Washington’s rigid tradition, race becomes “a serried, sable wall” that is gazed upon; “mortared” by “tact and power.” Ultimately, McKay’s anguishes not over rejection, but the loss of hopes and dreams; of the failure for a tradition to be realized fully. ³²

Such were the problems McKay incurred in dealing with an entrenched African

³⁰ McKay to Cunard, September 29, 1932, Harry Ransom.

³¹ Dunbar wrote “On the Dedication of Dorothy Hall,” Tuskegee, Ala., April 22, 1901: “God Give to these within this temple here, / Clear vision of the dignity of toil, / That virtue in them may its blossoms rear / Unspotted, fragrant from the lowly soil.” (*Lyrics of Lowly Life: The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, 1896.)

³² McKay noted that Washington “had put into practice, for its material benefit, the principle of work advocated by the latter-day Carlyle.” (“Social and the Negro, *Workers’ Dreadnought* Jan. 31, 1920, p. 1-2) . McKay found that Washington’s focus on materiality “insidious,” and characterized his experiences at

American tradition, against which he revolted. This was particularly true when he wrote on racial themes. "Harlem Shadows," for instance, is a significant poem of the Harlem Renaissance, which was in vogue at the time and reflected reactions to Prohibition, Reconstruction, and World War I. It was a time when the masses, as Douglass predicted, became mobile and migratory, reflecting a diasporic nostalgia among the powerless and exploited. The noted African-American critic Addison Gayle (*Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War*, Broadside, 1972), who produced one of the first works on *The Black Aesthetic*, formalized the poem against an African American esthetic and tradition, which was contrary, I believe, to the poet's unique temperament.³³ Although McKay was the first to depict "individual Black characters who had heretofore received little serious treatment in black poetry," Gayle own male privileging (and his additional imposition of an Afro-American canon onto a colonial-trained English versifier) diminishes the significance of the trope of woman (echoes of Douglass and the downtrodden) that McKay was attempting to work out. Gayle's narrow, gendered – and, of course, racial – prejudice our reading, particularly as it corroborates the typical social-uplift attitudes of the era. McKay's view was pro-woman, so much like Douglass' uncritical stance. Gayle sees these "working women" as never being accepted into the "human family" until they have undergone "a spiritual baptism." These "prostitutes" – a term McKay avoids – for Gayle have an "inferior status"

Tuskegee Institute, the brainchild of Washington, as "a semi-military, machine-like existence" (*Pearson's Magazine*, September 1918).

³³ It first appeared in *Pearson's* in 1918, and was included in the 1920 *Spring in New Hampshire*. It was also the title poem of *Harlem Shadows* (1922) and appeared in the posthumous *The Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953).

and “evoke pity and condescension.”³⁴ But Gayle misses McKay’s focus. The *shadows* are what’s important for McKay, and not the occupation. McKay is broadly sizing up an industry – one of many – that increasingly worked in the shadows of New York – and which was made up, not just of prostitutes, but the cleaning ladies and waitresses and maids. In a sense they were all creations of this “stern harsh world.” The theme of prostitutes, however, was used frequently in poetry of the era, and was not restricted to Harlem or its dancers. In contrast to McKay, these writers seemed more motivated by social uplift – and the trope of the fallen women, a Victorian-era preoccupation – than with their own hypocrisy and unwillingness to look into those shadows. The poet Louis Untermeyer, for instance, writes in “Any City” that she travels on “night rounds” with the same

She goes on her nightly round,
With weary and tireless feet
Over the wretched ground.

A thing that man never spurns,
A thing that all men despise;
Into her soul here burns
The street with its pitiless eyes.

Untermeyer’s poetic gaze is monopolized by the male voyeur – a “thing” that “man never spurns, / A thing that all men despise.” He speaks more from a Victorian perspective that was shared – if not poetically, then politically – with women and men of a certain class and breeding. Likewise, Lydia Gibson in “Lies” tells us that

Under the shadow-spreading trees
They walk, the slender silhouettes,
Night-hidden, but for outlines hard,
Slow-stepping, wanly mad to please,
While, heart-deep, endless Hunger frets.

³⁴ Addison Gayle, *Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War* (Chicago: Broadside Press, 1972), p. 25-27.

The preoccupation with “fallen women” was a popular trope and used among reformers of the era politically and religiously. In contrast, McKay saw feminism as a remedy to entrenched social and political perceptions, much as Douglass did. This new masculinity was at the center of world revolt, with women as the vanguard. The “only solution to the problem,” McKay remarked, would be in women “carrying the message of Socialism to both white and black workers.”³⁵ Uniquely, McKay imbued the Harlem Renaissance – and early twentieth-century cultural politics in general – with a sensitivity to women, women’s issues, and gender barriers – something for which he is never given full credit. Instead, he has been condemned for his crude portrayals of prostitutes. But such sensitivity was a natural union between internationalism and feminist inclinations, for McKay, and were nurtured in a childhood that viewed women as central to the political process.

ONE WAY MEN BECAME INVOLVED WITH SUFFRAGE ISSUES IN THE PERIOD – without writing or sounding patronizingly offensive – was through the Men’s League for Woman’s Suffrage. It, too, was internationalist, with chapters throughout the world. And, importantly, the League was endorsed and encouraged by women radicals. Among its members, for instance, were such notables as William Dean Howells, John Dewey, Oswald Garrison Villard (who was one of the founders of the NAACP and *The Crisis*), Samuel Untermyer, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and of course Max Eastman.

While the League reflected an internationalist perspective, in England it was more

³⁵ McKay, “Socialism and the Negro,” *Dreadnought*, Jan 31, 1920, p. 1-2.

intimately associated with Fabian socialism. The League appealed to the colonial governor Syndey Olivier, the Pankhursts, and the playwright George Bernard Shaw. All of whom were feminists and Fabians. Richard Marsden Pankhurst, husband of Emmeline, a Fabian reformer, and Jacob Bright, a Quaker educated in the anti-slavery and anti-corn traditions, started the English Men's League in 1907. The appeal of the "pro-suffrage position," according to some feminist historians, "seemed to invite a sense of superiority with the men claiming the moral high ground." In England, both male and female proponents of suffrage were more likely to be involved in tax resistance as well pacifism and direct action, unlike their American counterparts, who were more reform-oriented and less confrontational.³⁶ The formal entry of men onto the field of women's suffrage helped to galvanize an international movement, and League's appeared in Sweden, France, Germany and Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States, where 30 branches opened around the country. Nearly 50 percent of the League's membership were scholars, journalists or authors, and included, for instance, H.G. Wells in England, also a Fabian socialist, and John Dewey, the president of the Men's League in New York. It also had appeal among students, and there were chapters at Cambridge and Harvard universities. (John 23). Although McKay never became a League member (by the time of his arrival in New York, the League's activism was in decline), he was closely acquainted with its members, such as Dewey, Eastman, and Villard. McKay had praised Villard, who was instrumental in

³⁶ Richard Marsden Pankhurst's "moral high ground" was expressed at the first Women's Franchise meeting in 1889, which led to the formation of the Male Electors League for Women's Suffrage. In 1903, both husband and wife devoted their energies exclusively to suffrage politics: Emmeline helped to form the WSPU (Women's Suffrage Political Union) while the Men's League, under Richard's guidance, presented a petition

beginning *The Crisis* and the NAACP, as one of the few publishers who stood “as the solitary and only consistent representative of the American bourgeoisie, counseling peace and moderation” – a somewhat cautionary appraisal.³⁷ And Dewey would be one of the few confidantes who McKay believed truly understood his poetry. With Villard’s involvement, *The Crisis* consistently covered women’s suffrage issues. Articles, for instance, concerned “The Justice of Women’s Suffrage” (September 1912), a special issue devoted to women’s suffrage (which admonished its readers not to mob women suffragettes), “Woman Suffrage” (March 1920), “Triumph – Women’s Suffrage” (October 1920) on the challenges for women of the newly acquired vote, as well as pieces on the “League of Nations” and “Bleeding Ireland.” Villard’s mother was Fanny Garrison, who had called for the Hague Conference in a Fifth Avenue March on August 29, 1914, and at 70 years of age was the grandam of the women’s and abolitionist legacy.

Those early internationalists who began as male suffragettes were a unique group that “subverted yet also reinforced tradition.” And most important for “pro-suffrage men’s politics,” notes Angelea V. John and Claire Eustance, was their desires to express “different masculinities” (29).

British male suffragists might exert themselves for women’s suffrage but, on the whole, they did not examine the basis of their own masculinity. In contrast, the sex radicals of Greenwich, New York appear more progressive, and such couples as Max Eastman and Ida Rauh offered, in addition a critique of gender and class relations.

to the House of Commons. Angela V. John and Claire Eustance, *Men’s Share: Masculinities, Male Support and Women’s Suffrage in Britain, 1890-1920*, NY Routledge, 1997.

³⁷ McKay, *Workers’ Dreadnought*, January 31, 1920.

Max Eastman, looking back on this period, recalled that “it was extremely difficult” for him to stand up and be counted as a “male suffragette.” It meant “not only that I had asserted my manhood, but that I had passed beyond the need of asserting it.” ³⁸

This sensitivity to women’s issues, particularly when we realize that many of McKay’s closest allies were women radicals, can be foregrounded in reading McKay’s “If We Must Die” – another canonical work of the Harlem Renaissance. It was in 1919, as Crystal Eastman was furiously involved with pacifism and the anti-war effort, that her eye caught McKay’s “If We Must Die,” and suggested it for the summer issue of *The Liberator*. It appeared unassumingly under the banner “Sonnets and Songs” along with a grouping of poems that has been called “an explosive two-page spread . . . heavy with sarcasm and devastating.” ³⁹ Alongside the poem appeared lesser-known though equally important pieces by McKay that have resisted re-publication until recently, such as “The Negro Dancers,” “A Capitalist at Dinner,” “The Little Peoples,” and “A Roman Holiday.” Besides the irony of “Sonnets and Songs” (should we read “If We Must Die” as a sonnet or a song?), the poems are about different forms of oppression that can easily be read against Eastman’s impassioned “A Statement Read at the First Feminist Congress in the United States, New York, March 1, 1919,” which appeared in a July 1919 *Liberator*.

For two years, the whole western world has been talking about freedom and democracy. Now that the war is over and it is possible to think calmly once more, we must examine these popular abstractions, and consider (especially here in the United States where the boasting has been loudest) – how much freedom and democracy we actually have. Above all it behooves women to determine frankly what their status is in the republic. ⁴⁰

³⁸ John and Eustance, p. 24, 29. Also see Kimmel and Mosmiller, *Against the Tide*.

³⁹ *The Liberator*, July 1919, p. 20-21. Wayne Cooper, in *Rebel Sojourner*, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution*, p. 49.

Eastman catalogued the social and political slippage as a result of the war:

it is fairly clear that women in America today not only share the wholesale denial of civil liberty which came with the war and remains to bless our victory, but carry a special burden of restrictive legislation and repressive social custom – (not in any way relieved by the war for freedom nor affected by the two years' crusade of democratic eloquence) – a burden which halts them in almost every field of endeavor, and effectual marks them as an inferior class.

She concluded in the same spirit of self-determination expressed by those of minority status around the globe:

It is my hope that this first Women's Freedom Conference, held in New York City, will see the birth of a new spirit in American women – a spirit of humane and intelligent self-interest – a spirit of determined pride – which will lead them to declare: *'We will not wait for the Social Revolution to bring us the freedom we should have won in the 19th century'* (italics in original; Cook 50-51).

As an internationalist, McKay would have applauded this analysis, especially the broader implications of abolition and self-determination in Eastman's manifesto. "If We Must Die" has as its subtext a discourse on gender and racial oppression that reflected this richly political era.⁴¹ Internationalism was the beginning of a "revolutionary" commitment to pacifism and socialism, for Eastman, McKay, and others, and many forfeited their careers and social standing as a result of the so-called Red Scare. Eastman's life, as McKay noted, was unsettled, and she found herself unemployable after an illustrious career serving New York and national administrations as a labor adviser. Her move to England may have been

⁴¹ Because of its anonymity, "If We Must Die" and other famous statements of racial oppression by gay black authors, particularly those closeted during the Harlem Renaissance era, is easily "referable to homosexual oppression," notes Gregory Woods in *Critical Essays: Gay and Lesbian Writers of Color*. Such an interpretation of "If We Must Die," Woods feels, "would do far less damage to the text, which is usually and sensibly read in reference to racial prejudice" (92). Woods' contextualization creates a very different poem, one in which the sexual is the political. McKay was a notorious bisexual and hedonist. For instance, Harold Jackman wrote to McKay, who was living in Marseilles, on April 22, 1928, that there were rumors McKay had taken "a wife." Jackman explained to McKay, parenthetically, should he coded words be misinterpreted: "meaning Cullen, of course." Jackman-McKay correspondence, Beinecke Library, Yale University. There are also numerous allusions in letters to C.K. Ogden, about homosexual affairs.

motivated, in part, I believe, by being blacklisted in the United States – a similar fate that awaited McKay as well.

1919 was a key moment in international affairs – for feminism as well as racial consciousness-raising. The slow, brutal winnowing away of promises in the aftermath of World War I was not limited to women, many realized. Lost political ground was also felt by African Americans. The New Negro was an attempt at regaining some of those losses, but it was at the expense of individuality and cultural integrity. The first of many Pan-African conferences occurred in 1919, and were reported on by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Crisis*; the Red Scare and the Palmer raids were at their height; the United States had gone to war first with Mexico, and then Haiti; there was unrest in England and Europe. In Germany, Rosa Luxemburg would be jailed and mysteriously murdered along with her companion. McKay made particular note of the “revolutionary propaganda work” of a meeting in Washington of the “National Brotherhood of Workers of America” which was “entirely Negro” and linked with the insurgent I.W.W., a hoped-for broad-based movement; and, of course, 1919 is indelibly marked for scholars of the Harlem Renaissance with the Red Summer, when returning WWI veterans and unemployment, mixed with racism, ignited riots throughout the country.⁴²

“If We Must Die” is successful because of its anonymity. It is also written in the vernacular tradition, to be sung, as McKay saw all his poems as songs. Thus it speaks to

⁴² Racial unrest began as early as 1918 in St. Louis. The high point of the Red Scare was when Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, along with 247 other aliens accused of being radicals, were forced onto the Buford troopship and sent off to Russia. (see O'Neill p. 93). The Hungarian Revolution was just beginning and there were factory occupations in Italy and general strikes in Amsterdam (See Davis in *Sylvia Pankhurst*, p. 82) McKay discussion of 1919 and the importance of the Conference of National Brotherhood

peasant concerns. It has a callused peasant feel as well, and prompted a reporter for *Time* magazine to identify its "crude penmanship" as originating from an "unknown prisoner," and circulated among Latino and black inmates at Attica in September of 1971 "as clandestine writings of their own." Curiously a copy was also found among the possessions of a white American soldier who had died on the Russian front during WWII. The anonymity of the poet in both instances extends the irony and complicates the poem's intentions, which was not lost on McKay. When he first heard of the story over the radio during the height of the war, McKay was bemused. "The commentator did not mention the name of the author Nor did he state the poem was the work of the colored man. Perhaps he did not know." In his comments on a Folkways recording, done in the late 1940s, McKay was "gratified and justified" by the poem's broad appeal. It was, he noted,

just what I intended it to be: A universal poem. And wherever men are pressed with their backs against the wall, abused, outraged, and murdered, whether they are minorities or nations, black or brown or yellow or white, Catholics, Protestants or pagans, fighting against the Terror, "If We Must Die" could be appropriately read.⁴³

McKay clearly constructed the poem to mirror this internationalist moment. In contrast, it's been read by Addison Gayle, William Stanley Braithwaite, and others as simply part of a grouping of "violent sonnets" that were esthetically and temperamentally removed from a larger grouping of poems about "love and longing" (Gayle 28). "If we must die," the poem begins, "let it not be like hogs"

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

of Workers can be found in his essay "Socialism and the Negro," which appeared in the *Workers' Dreadnought* (January 31, 1920).

⁴³ *Anthology of Negro Poets*. New York: Folkways, 1954. Anra Bontemps, editor.

If we must die – oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! ⁴⁴

If McKay is to be believed (many thought he was sly and an opportunist), “If We Must Die” is a broad response to outrages taking place in the United States and elsewhere during that momentous year, tempered by those international activities of which he was a part. It was a poem, he observed with mixed feelings,

that made me a poet among coloured Americans. I have always felt that my gift of song was something bigger than this American defining limits of any one people and its problem” (Bontemps). ⁴⁵

He noted that “even though many of my themes were racial,” his poem made “a universal appeal” (Bontemps). Thus “If We Must Die” cannot be abstracted, cut off from its cultural source, which was internationalism. Nor should it be perceived simply as “an exhortation to black men not to go meekly.” ⁴⁶

It's easy to stretch the summer of 1919, not to the riots in Chicago, which some say prompted “If We Must Die” – or even to McKay's own fears while working on the railroad

⁴⁴ As with most of the poems later edited by Eastman (*Harlem Shadows* and *The Selected*), stanzas and indentations have been altered. In this case, a stanza break had been eliminated. Restoring the break returns the poem to original sonnet form, which was the style that ran through the sonnets in this grouping, such as “The Barrier,” “After the Winters,” “A Capitalist at Dinner,” “The Little Peoples,” and “A Roman Holiday.”

⁴⁵ Rhonda Cobham in “Jekyll and Claude” (*Queer Diasporas*, Duke UP, 2000) characterizes “If We Must Die” as an anti-lynching poem.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, p. 99. Specifically, McKay pointed out that “If We Must Die” was written during the time of the Chicago riots, when he was a train waiter for the Pennsylvania Railroad, between New York and Washington. “I remember we waiters and cooks carried revolvers in secret and always kept together going

- but to England where at the war's end Jake in *Home to Harlem* "saw a big battle staged between colored and white men of London's East End."⁴⁷ Using London as a cultural frame for *Home to Harlem* helps us to understand McKay's political perspective: London, as McKay learned in Jamaica, was viewed as "the metropolis of the country that we were taught as kids to call Motherland."⁴⁸ It was the center of his Empire - and represented all things great and enduring. For McKay, it would be the place where artistry and soul are found, and McKay would make a voyage there in 1920 to published *Spring in New Hampshire*. The year 1919 in general continues to figure prominently in *Home to Harlem*, a narrative that begins in 1919 and concludes the same year, with Jake Brown and Felice escaping Harlem for the grittier Chicago - a place Carl Sandburg described, in the poem by the same name, as the "Hog Butcher of the World." Jake has lived in England, where he first experiences racial violence, and encounters the Haitian Ray in America. We are also aware that by the novel's end, though he presumably is off to Chicago, Jake will eventually reappear in Marseilles as an international drifter in *Banjo*, the second part of this diasporic journey. One critic has enlarged the compacted racial world of "If We Must Die," for instance, preferring to see the hog trope as "ironic" commentary on blacks who are trapped in the "city" (and, one might observe, within *national* borders as well). Within such a perspective, geography is important. We cannot ignore the association of Chicago, with its infamous stockyards, to exploited immigrant workers in the colonies and elsewhere.

from our quarters to the railroad yards," noted McKay in a March 6, 1932, *New York Herald-Tribune Books* article.

⁴⁷ McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 7; qtd in Heglar, "Claude McKay's 'If We Must Die,' *Home to Harlem*, and the Hog Trope." *ANQ* 8:3 (Summer 1995): 5-27.

⁴⁸ McKay, "Up To Date," p. 1. Harry Ransom.

McKay's "mad and hungry dogs," which conjure for many black Americans a Southern vigilante posse, are also the fierce dogs of Sandburg's "Chicago," who are "lapping for action."

John Lowney also finds McKay "more politically complex than most accounts of him as a 'Harlem Renaissance' writer indicate," and as someone who is perceived erroneously within an "African American national framework" (2). Critical works such as David Levering Lewis' *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Lowney suggests, have been unreceptive to McKay's "cross-cultural dimensions" (14). Lowney points to the recent work by Michelle Stephens, who attempts to broaden those boundaries and definitions of diaspora, and Harlem in particular. Stephens sees the cultural tensions in the early twentieth century between an internationalism that "aims to bring nations together" and a transnationalism that "seeks to go beyond the nation from itself."⁴⁰

Much like the novel *Home to Harlem*, which *on the surface* is confined to nonwhite characters, the poem "If We Must Die" transcends racial geography and sensibilities as well. We *assume* it is about "blacks," when in reality it is disembodied and transcendent. "If We Must Die" undermines literary form and intention, and masks and unmasks racial assumptions. McKay also skillfully uses understatement and irony, encoded and interwoven with traditional English literary forms, which he reorients within a racial script to suit his political temperament. (He was fortunate to have a mentor, Walter Jekyll, who provided a grounding in the literary techniques of "annancy," which allowed a storyteller,

⁴⁰Michelle Stephens, "Black Transnationalism and the Politics of National Identity: West Indian Intellectuals in Harlem in the Age of War and Revolution." *American Quarterly* 50:3 (1998), p. 607; qtd in Lowney 15.

such as McKay, the literary room to weave a web – “annancy” means spider – of misinterpretations.) As with “If We Must Die,” one naturally assumes a racial content, while in fact it is a proletarian work of the era, broadly transnational, as Lowney and others have observed. (Mike Gold, who published an anthology of proletarian writing, neglected to include the poem, and that fact is itself a comment on his own failings as a radical to understand a black proletarian writing).

“During the early years of the Harlem Renaissance,” Lowney notes, “the one concern that most unified African American and Caribbean intellectuals was the demand for Haitian self-determination.” Lowney explains that Du Bois himself had appealed to his readers to oppose the occupation of Haiti as early as 1915 in the pages of *The Crisis*, and James Weldon Johnson, the most prominent African American critic of United States foreign policy at that time, reported injustices in occupied Haiti in 1920 for *The Crisis* and *The Nation*” (2). Johnson’s reportage was prompted by massive unrest that took place in 1919 in which U.S. military forces murdered over 3,000 Haitians. At issue, at least for McKay, was the United States’ meddling in the land-distribution affairs of Haiti, where attempts were made to implement a plantation economy for the benefit of American business interests. Such a reversal in the hard won land-tenure system of the peasants may have evoked memories of Jamaica’s own struggles for land reform for the poet, during Olivier’s term as governor. Using Lowney’s reading of *Home to Harlem* against the context of the occupation of Haiti, which began in 1915 and ended in 1934, helps to contextualize the *international* language of “If We Must Die.”

For this reader now, the poem shows the convergence of international feminism and pacifism, closeted homosexual outrage as well as an interest in colonial self-determination and worker-peasant unity. But it is a tradition that goes back to McKay's early years in Jamaica, in such poems as "Passive Resistance," written during a streetcar-fare protest in Jamaica in February 1912. For McKay and others, pacifism was the credo of internationalists, even during those violent times of lynching and political murders. McKay, too, believed in nonviolence, but not to the point of cultural annihilation. In "Passive Resistance," he offered an alternative to bloodshed.

There's be no more riotin'
Stonin' p'lice an' burnin' cars;
But we mean to gain our rights
By a strong though bloodless war.

We will show an alien trust
Dat Jamaicans too can fight
An' dat while our blood is hot,
They won't crush us wi' deir might.

Hawks may watch us as dey like,
But we do not care a pin;
We will hold "the boys" in check,
There'll be no more riotin'.

We are sorry, sorry much
For the worry given some;
But it will not last for aye, –
Our vict'ry day shall come.

There are aliens in our midst
Who would slay us for our right;
Yet though vipers block the way
We will rally to the fight.

We'll keep up a bloodless war,
We will pay the farthings-fare
An' we send the challenge forth,

“Only touch us if you dare!”⁵⁰

McKay espoused a pacifism that set boundaries of *resistance*; and he was painfully aware of the “hawk” hovering and waiting, enticing and hectoring. For some, however, McKay’s bold “dare” was construed as provocative, layered with racial overtones.

Likewise, “If We Must Die” provokes the reader, and uses such incendiary words as “kinsmen” to complicate the poem’s meaning. Is McKay being modernist or tribal, one wonders, with a little unease. But “kinsmen” also is a more intimate term, and speaks to those of like intellectual minds. For instance, a year after McKay published “If We Must Die,” he wrote in the *Workers’ Dreadnought*:

With millions of men engaged in the game of international murder, and millions more employed to look after the welfare of the combatants, a few million, toiling hard by night and day, toiling overtime, were able to carry out the stupendous task of necessary production and distribution: and they, also, produced enough to make their own, and the fighters’ welfare, materially better than ever it had hitherto been, and even enriched private profiteers beyond their wildest dream. If the plump profiteers could disgorge the immense profits of the war, and absorb the returned men and women in industry, and if blockades and all other artificial barriers were removed and all countries allowed to trade freely, international society would soon right itself, the world’s workers would not be owed beneath the burden of a great war debt.⁵¹

A new world order was taking shape while “we are working and waiting for our revolution” – an impatience expressed by feminist internationals as well. McKay continued, in demarcating his two cultural poles

London or New York? Which shall be the first gambling den of the world? All the

⁵⁰ The poem appeared in the April 6, 1912 issue of the *Daily Gleaner*, a few months after McKay ended his tour of duty as a policeman. The controversy was over a fare increase on the Canadian-owned streetcar line, and opposition to the fare increase took the form of “passive resistance” – paying the two-pence fare in farthings, and slow down the service, and request a receipt. Olivier attempted to negotiate with some of the more violent elements of the demonstrations, and was stoned. The Riot Act was read, and one person was shot and killed. Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, p., 52-53.

⁵¹ *Workers’ Dreadnought*, “An International Money Crisis,” February, 14, 1920.

wild talk about greater production, inflation, national debt and Labour's unfair demands, hangs on this issue.⁵²

With the colonial unrest in Haiti and Ireland (a topic McKay wrote about in the *Dreadnought* and *Liberator*), the riots that were sweeping across the United States, and the concessions of Labour in England, McKay's poem is an act of resistance and hope during a time of national re-formations – a poem for many different kinds of dispossessed readers. Michelle Stephens has made note of the importance of the events before and after World War I and that shift in power in which “New nations are to be formed. Old nations are to be recreated. Tyranny is to die. Subject races are to be freed.”⁵³ Thus, to re-introduce Houston Baker Jr., there is no such thing as “one” reading of a poem, and such canonical black authors such as McKay can no longer be read as “merely black.” Against McKay's “unsettling” blackness (which the poet uses, in Baker's definition, to undermine lines of established black and white discourse) is to be found the beginnings of a diasporic literary sensibility.⁵⁴

WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS that are so compactly expressed in “If We Must Die,” we can see other poems, written also during this era, unfold dramatically against race and the peculiar black American exceptionalism that took hold of Harlem and other places with a frenzy. This unfolding provides, as Houston Baker points out, a reading that transcends the “merely black.” “Roman Holiday,” for instance, straddles that category of

⁵² *Workers' Dreadnought*, Feb 14, 1920.

⁵³ Cyril Briggs, *Crusader* Vol. 1, Jan. 1919, p. 153; quoted in Stephens, p. 599.

⁵⁴ Baker, Houston A. “Preface: Unsettling Blackness.” *American Literature* 72:2 (2000), p. 247.

“merely black,” since its title is so fused with lynching in the psyche of African Americans of that era. The poem also continues the “hog theme,” as it shifts to a specific geography to the “New South.” “Roman holidays” are participant sports in which the whole community lusts for blood. It has its roots in Roman polytheism, and is McKay’s comment on the traditions upon which Western culture rests. “ ’Tis but a *modern* Roman holiday,” the poet explains, where

Each state invokes its soul of basest passion,
Each vies with each to find the ugliest way
To torture Negroes in the fiercest fashion.
Black Southern men, like hogs await your doom!
White wretches hunt and haul you from your huts,
They squeeze the babies out of your women's womb;
They cut your members off, rip out your guts!

It is a Roman holiday, and worse:
It is the mad beast, risen from his lair,
The dead accusing years' eternal curse,
Reeking of vengeance, in fulfillment here,
Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power
That saved sick Europe in her darkest hour!

The “mad beast” in the poem anticipates “the Terror” McKay spoke of when he explained the poem “If We Must Die” to listeners in the 1940s. It also recalls Yeats’ “rough beast” in his 1919 poem, “The Second Coming.” Philosophically, this terror might be seen as a form of “social death,” in which the poet sees himself as culturally annihilated – as a colonial and internationalist. “Roman Holiday” describes real – and also imagined – acts of brutality in this terrain of a new “democracy,” and the poem successfully conflates the old and new South, with the old and new world orders then in transition. Like the “pack mentality” that McKay argues against in “If We Must Die,” McKay erases the fine line between national wars and racially motivated acts of brutality. That violence – against an anonymous violence – is juxtaposed with a critique of condoned militarism – the “program

of preparedness" lampooned by Eastman and other pacifists – that "saved sick Europe in her darkest hour." For McKay, the local is interwoven with the international, a technique used in many other poems. McKay's Island sensibility, for instance, is fractured along geographic faults and depressions, and he continually works at re-invention a colonial – and an African American – position.

Another poem along these lines is "White Fiend," which was first sent to Braithwaite (in a different form) around 1916. It was included with a grouping of personal poems that concerned love and alienation. Reprinted in a September 1919 issue of *The Liberator* as a reminder of white backlash during the riots that year, it first appeared in *Pearson's* magazine in 1918. The opening stanza describes the common practice of burning victims beyond recognition after they have been lynched and, in some cases, castrated. McKay noted:

In the South daily murders of a nature most hideous and revolting, in the North
silent acquiescence, deep hate half-hidden under a puritan respectability, oft
flaming up into an occasional lynching – this ugly raw sore in the body of a great
nation. “

But McKay, I believe, complicates those images with early twentieth-century European interests in African cultural "wealth." Gayle, again, misses that geography and orientation of the poem and, instead, links McKay's project to the narrow "Southland" culture associated with Paul Laurence Dunbar (29).⁵⁶ But in conflating two geographies, McKay challenges mere national interests, and shows the transparency of imperialism, reminiscent

⁵⁵ *Pearson's* magazine, September 1918, in "A Negro Poet."

⁵⁶ "Southland" in McKay's later "Spanish Needle" takes on the contours of the Caribbean and lower North America

of Herbert Jekyll's horticultural remarks in *The Garden*. The plunder of Africa was on everyone's mind; while the concern over lynchings in the South were being underestimated. Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial*, notes that the population of Belgian Congo "was slashed in half: from roughly 20 million to 10 million people" between 1880 and 1920. It made headlines throughout the world. "To the White Fiends" turns on this global image, and reverses the racial gaze.

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?

Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match – out-match: am I not Afric's son,
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?
But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!

As is his style, the poem's rage is confined by Romantic and Renaissance literary traditions, which McKay skillfully navigates as he travels from new to old, colonized and oppressor. Black is contrasted to white, light and dark, in literary allusions that are commingled with events and actions around the world. As with "Little Peoples," where black becomes a trope for abuse, white becomes associated with fiendishness. It is the color and representation, however, that McKay is concerned with. The poet understood Renaissance and Romantic conceptions of black and white – such as William Blake exclamation "But I am black as if bereav'd of light" in "The Little Black Boy" and Shakespeare's evocation of

lust and desires as black and white images in *The Sonnets* – and McKay inverts them as well. In the first movement, he reconfigures race as a signifier for cultural wholeness. McKay's use of inversion comes out of a tradition that viewed blackness as messianic (on par with Garvey's demonization of white culture and Countee Cullen's Afrocentricized religious yearnings). But McKay reconceptualized "blackness" as a device that would tame a world out of control, and provide balance, unity, and soul – much as he viewed the suffrage movement.

While "Roman Holiday" explores racial violence in the "mad beast" of an America that entered the European war for democracy unequipped to build unity at home, "The Capitalist at Dinner" links war, profits, and procreation in an unholy alliance. Capitalism and war were both made possible by the working masses, and therefore they had more of a responsibility to not "feed" the frenzied war machine with their labor. McKay made use of the rhetoric of the antiwar and feminist movements in describing a strategy against this postwar New Order. The trope of the hog, which symbolized the confines of the city, gives way to the more pastoral "sheep" in "The Capitalist at Dinner." The hog trope evokes images of industrial breeding (and also of forced miscegenation during slavery) – as well as the "unnatural" migration from rural to urban. Yet these "helpless sheep" seem too innocent. Are they metaphors for pacifist ideals? Is McKay criticizing the inability of pacifists (and feminists) to challenge this frightening new order, one wonders? The poem

reflects an international moment beyond a Harlem Renaissance that celebrated racial identity.⁵⁷

An ugly figure, heavy; overfed,
Settles uneasily into a chair;
Nervously he mops his pimply pink bald head,
Frowns at the fawning waiter standing near.
The entire service tries its best to please
This over-pampered piece of broken-health,
Who sits there thoughtless, querulous, obese,
Wrapped in his sordid visions of vast wealth.

Great God! if creatures like this money-fool,
Who the service of mankind so cheap,
Over the people must forever rule,
Driving them at their will like helpless sheep –
Then let proud mothers cease from giving birth;
Let human beings perish from the earth.

In reading the poem, I'm reminded of a meeting between Max Eastman – far from the “ugly figure” described in the poem – and McKay at a greasy spoon, and how the esthetics of the place offended the white editor. McKay, however, as a waiter and service person, can easily be seen as personifying the “fawning waiter” who cowers before this “over-pampered piece of broken-health” – the publishing industry and war machine. More importantly, McKay suggests the use of birth control as a revolutionary act. Birth control had been argued by pacifists during the war as a means to limit the supply of cannon fodder. McKay also saw its use as a way of challenging worker exploitation, since increased abuse and lower pay were related to the large pool of unemployed workers. Within this liberating moment,

⁵⁷ Wayne Cooper writes that almost all the poems in the July 1919 *Liberator* dealt directly with “a fierce, unswerving loyalty to the ‘common people’ of his race.” One exception, he noted, was the “sardonic portrait” entitled “The Capitalist at Dinner” (*Rebel* 101-02). This is one of the first of a series of political poems that were published with increasing frequency in *The Liberator* and the *Dreadnought*, where McKay worked before his move to Moscow in 1922. Many critics feel that the political poems are rough and uneven, and as an explanation to their failings cite the regularity of pseudonyms, indicating McKay’s awareness that they were more propagandistic than poetic.

a poems such as "The Little Peoples," which might easily be read as merely a diatribe on oppression, becomes a skillfully crafted critique on international politics – a commentary on the subtle tensions over the League of Nations' formation in the aftermath of World War I. For many, the League of Nations offered the possibility of renewed hope around the world, particularly in addressing grievances within the United States. Crystal Eastman advocated for such just "a federation of peoples" in February 1919.

We believe in a League of Nations as the one thing that will ever remove the menace of nationalistic war from the earth. We believe that it must be a definite, concrete, continuous and working federation of the peoples. We believe that such a thing may come to pass in the near future; and we will work for it. ⁵⁸

It is interesting to note that Frederick Douglass first proposed a people's federation at a symbolic protest at the Columbia Exposition in 1893, where he and the feminist Ida B. Wells distributed *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbia Exposition*. But a League of Nations also concerned *Crisis* readers as well as Fabians, since Africa was the playing field for European interests. Sydney Olivier, for instance, in "The League of Nations and Primitive Peoples," published in 1918, called for protection of native land rights, and equated foreign politics with "African politics." ⁵⁹ In his poem, McKay builds on these preoccupations, and again inverts assumptions. These "little people" are, in fact, not the colonized, but Europeans – *little* in their isolation and prejudices – yet privileged by the fruits of capital and war. McKay invokes the enigmatic "veil" – a term that complicates the poem along racial assumptions – as an entry point into this league of "big men." The "little nations that are weak and white" a possible reference

⁵⁸ "A League of Which Nations," *The Liberator*, February 1919; qtd. in Cook, 296.

to Belgium, whose history of racial abuses in the Congo were infamous; and whose differences with Germany, over its African possessions, would cause England to come to its aid.

The little peoples of the troubled earth,
The little nations that are weak and white;
For them the glory of another birth,
For them the lifting of the veil of night.
The big men of the world in concert met,
Have sent forth in their power a new decree:
Upon the old harsh wrongs the sun must set,
Henceforth the little peoples must be free!

The second stanza shifts perspective to “the blacks” – yet McKay does not necessarily mean a racial characterization, but as group identity.

But we, the blacks, less than the trampled dust,
Who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes, –
We to the ancient gods of greed and lust
Must still be offered up as sacrifice:
Oh, we who deign to live but will not dare,
The white world's burden must forever bear!

“Blacks” denotes second-class citizenship and alludes to the exploited around the globe “who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes” – and are offered up in sacrifice to the “white man’s burden” of “greed and lust.” The “white man’s burden” had many implications, particularly with regard to the color and texture of the homeland. “But the color-line is not a rational line, the logic neither of words nor acts will uphold it,” Olivier had once noted, particularly as that burden comes home to stew. In the colonial situation, Olivier believed that “no solution of the color difficulties can be found except by resolutely

³⁹ Olivier, *The League of Nations and Primitive Peoples*, Oxford U P, 1918.

turning the back to the color-line and race differentiation theory.”⁶⁰ Olivier was more reserved than McKay, who urged that black men rise up and shake off this burden or they’ll have it forever: “Oh, we who deign to live, but will not dare,” he laments.

MCKAY’S POEMS LANGUISHED AT *THE MASSES* FOR MORE THAN A YEAR. But soon after Eastman founded *The Liberator* with her brother in 1918, she met with McKay and culled a selection of poems. She had McKay pass them on to her brother, Max, who was considered more experienced on matters of poetry.⁶¹ The Eastmans and McKay were temperamentally matched. In their inaugural issue of *The Liberator*, for instance, they urged readers to “unite our hands and voices to make the end of this war the beginning of an age of freedom and happiness for mankind undreamed by those whose mind’s comprehend only political and military events” (“Editorial” *Liberator* March 1918, p. 3). In language clearly devoid of political rhetoric. *The Liberator* with the Eastmans, then McKay, as editor, called for “self-determination for all peoples” in “an international union, based upon free seas, free commerce and general disarmament”; it called for birth control, advocated “opening the land to the people”; supported “the complete independence of women – political, social, and economic – and an enrichment of the existence of mankind”; and “asserted the social and political equality of the black and white races” opposing “every kind of racial

⁶⁰ Olivier, “The White Man’s Burden at Home,” *International Quarterly* (April 1905), p. 6, 23.

⁶¹ At the time *The Liberator* was conceived, it was co-edited equally by brother and sister. But soon Max Eastman elevated himself to editor, while Crystal Eastman assumed the daily editorial responsibilities as managing editor. In such a capacity, she probably came across McKay’s poems, which had been relegated to a slush pile, where they sat for over a year from *The Masses* days. When she left the magazine to travel to England, Max Eastman could not handle the day-to-day work of the magazine, and appointed Mike Gold and Claude McKay editors, and left for Russia.

discrimination” and to “conduct a remorseless publicity campaign against lynch law.” Under the banner of internationalism, Max and Crystal Eastman unified issues of racial equality, birth control, feminism under a program of cultural “self-determination” that emphasized “complete freedom in art and poetry and fiction and criticism. It will be candid. It will be experimental It will hospitable to new thoughts and feelings. It will direct its attacks against dogma and rigidity of mind upon whichever side they are found” (Cook 291). It was soon after “Dominant White” appeared in *The Liberator* on April 1919 that Crystal Eastman arranged a meeting with McKay, bringing him on as a contributor and, eventually, editor.

The *Liberator* was decidedly feminist, internationalist, and pacifist, and frequently reported on Crystal Eastman’s antiwar activities in New York and around the world.⁶² McKay later used the metaphor of *The Liberator*’s mission as a patient toiler working the “fertile field” of the American black population: “they have done real constructive work that is now bearing fruit,” the poet noted.⁶³ Such poems as “International Soul” and “Like a Strong Tree” reflect on this family of internationalists, who McKay adopted, and in turn became the voice of the disenfranchised – sex-industry workers, marginal migrant laborers, and others.

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth
Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay,
And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,
When dry waves scare the rain-come sprites away;

⁶² Crystal Eastman had already single-handedly founded the American Union Against Militarism, which met with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson over America’s involvement in World War I, and Max Eastman echoed her sentiments. He noted that, “I do not feel patriotic to any country. My sense of solidarity seems to attach to the human race as a whole, or to those classes in every country who’re struggling towards liberty.” (Preface, *Understanding Germany* ix-x).

⁶³ McKay, “Socialism and the Negro,” *Dreadnought*, Jan. 31, 1920.

Like a strong tree that reaches down deep, deep,
For sunken water, fluid underground,
Where the great-ringed unsightly blind worms creep,
And queer things of the nether world abound:
So would I live in rich imperial growth,
Touching the surface and depth of things,
Instinctively responsive unto both,
Tasting the sweets of being, fearing no stings,
Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,
Like a strong tree against a thousand storms.

McKay's strong tree was rooted in English reform traditions and not African or American race politics. He also loved the "deep, deep" nether world where "queer things abound," as he explained mysteriously. Much later, McKay found another "strong tree" in the culture of Rabat-Salé in North Africa: "Here the native life was the big tree with solid roots and spreading branches." ⁶⁴ Here, too, the family had less to do with group identity than with indigenous cultures. Likewise, the "strong tree" of internationalism touched "the surface and depth of things." McKay viewed himself as an international alchemist who was persuading "this great army" of exiled black and brown populations to the "finer system of Socialism." Such was the aspirations of his poem "International Soul," which was quoted in the introduction, in which images of birds, tides, and messengers combine, with a romantic training in revolution and revolt, in "breaking down obstacles to give new birth."

⁶⁵ To Nancy Cunard, McKay later wrote:

I don't believe in proletarian art nor bourgeois art nor all the other loose social definitions of art. To me authentic art is just there, whatever its origin, racial, national, or any kind of social, transcending its cadre and becoming a possession of all humanity and I don't give a hoot for the pedantic divisions and names except as means of identification. ⁶⁶

⁶⁴ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 298.

⁶⁵ McKay, "Socialism and the Negro," *Dreadnought*, Jan 31, 1920.

⁶⁶ McKay to Cunard, September 29, 1932. Harry Ransom.

In 1916, as McKay perfected his lyrical voice and had just moved to New York, Crystal Eastman completed a degree at New York University Law School, and was beginning her career as a social reformer, researching labor conditions for Kellogg's Pittsburgh Survey project. The 30-year-old editor of the *Survey Graphic*, whose mission it was to "reach into the corners of the world – America and all the Seven Seas – to wherever the tides of a generous progress are astir," recruited Eastman while she was working on her master's degree in sociology at Columbia. He had been in contact with Rosika Schwimmer, and helped to draft some of the resolutions for the Women's Conference at the Hague in 1915.⁶⁷ The Pittsburgh Survey, funded by the Sage Foundation, was groundbreaking. It took a holistic approach to "social problems" in studying industrial accidents, industrial employment among women, labor issues in the steel industry, family life, schooling, health and recreation. Its findings were published in three special issues of *Charities and the Commons* (the predecessor to the *Survey Graphic*) in the spring of 1909.⁶⁸

Kellogg was a social worker who graduated from the New York School of Social Work in 1902. He, too, was a reformer, feminist, and internationalist, and poured those prejudices into the pages of the *Survey Graphic*, which he edited from its founding in 1910

⁶⁷ See the Schwimmer-Lloyd Collection, New York Public Library.

⁶⁸ The magazine would soon change its name to *The Survey*, in homage to the new kind of social analysis first undertaken in Pittsburgh. In 1912 the journal became fully independent of the charities organizations that had spawned it and any subscriber who paid \$10 dollars or more could become a member of the Survey Associates and would be entitled to vote for members of the Board of Directors. Some of the Associates, such as Jane Addams (also a member of the Board of Directors) and Lillian Wald, would from time to time contribute articles to the journal. On the whole, the associates were conceived as a group of expert specialists that could be consulted for advice on issues of social significance. (See Finnegan, *Social Welfare and Visual Politics: The Story of Survey Graphic*, p. 11). Today, the Russell Sage Foundation is still involved with social issues, though more theoretical and academic. Started in 1907 by Margaret Olivia Sage, for a long time it was active in improving the social and living conditions of working and poor people in the United States. It later became active in housing issues, urban planning, social work projects, and labor reform.

to 1934.⁶⁹ Importantly, Kellogg was influenced by the social-reform work of the Fabian socialist and feminist Beatrice Webb. He admired her analysis of women and labor issues, and would encourage Eastman to explore women's issues in the work place. Webb's *The Cooperative Movement in Great Britain* was the model for Kellogg's Pittsburgh Survey. It also influenced his *British Labor and the War: Reconstructors for a New World* (1919), which idealized British socialism as a more correct insurgent "folk movement" against "the ascendancy of nationalism."

It is not like the single tax movement, or the prohibition movement, or the municipal ownership movement as we have known them in this country, because these are propaganda given over to a single issue. The British labor movement is rather the expression at a hundred points of great tidal impulses at work in the common life. (vii-viii)

The Pittsburgh Survey was a major statement on the condition of labor in America. It included Eastman's *Work Accidents and the Law* and a volume by Elizabeth Beardsley Butler on *Women and the Trades, Pittsburgh, 1907-08*, both of which Kellogg edited.⁷⁰ The Survey chronicled a typical turn-of-the-century industrial city to examine the gaps between the largely unskilled immigrant workers and the comfortable middle class managers, executives and politicians. By focusing on women particularly, areas largely ignored by the popular media of the day were stressed, such as the exploitation of immigrant women and children in factories. Kellogg noted:

⁶⁹ The journal became famous for the publication of Alain Locke's "Harlem: Mecca for the New Negro," which appeared in its March 1925 issue. Another recruit to the Pittsburgh Survey project was photographer Lewis Wickes Hines, who would become well known for his gritty Empire State Building photographs that conveyed the dignity and productivity in the post-WWII years of American workers. In 1906, however, Hines pursued a career in the exciting new field of "sociological photography," which the *Survey Graphic* celebrated.

⁷⁰ Butler also produced *Sales Women in Mercantile Stores, Baltimore, 1909* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1912), which attempted to argue for broader female representation in the growing mercantile sales market.

It is my belief that this outspoken, pioneer presentation will open up to public consideration, a situation which in our industrial districts has been weakly surrendered to inertia and trepidation.

Within this reformist temperament, McKay honed his poetic craft, and his poem, "The Park in Spring," speaks to this social blindness. The poem also evoking images of Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," written on December 31, 1900, the eve of a supposedly bright, new century, and images of uncertainty. When Frank Harris first read "The Park in Spring," in 1918, he observed how the poet had "a classical feeling and a modern way of expressing it."⁷¹ Unlike Hardy's harbinger of "Some blessed Hope," McKay's "thrush" is muted by the sight of derelicts seeking warmth and comfort on a park bench. Again, McKay uses English literary conventions to unsettle the contemporary, modern reader. Having neither "household fires" nor "coppice gate" to warm one's imagination, the poem is, instead, wedged between "Life's shadows" - again, McKay was persistent in working the margins. While paralleling Hardy's thematic movement, the poem ends on a less pastoral, enigmatic note: a commentary on the poverty and malaise that was affecting the souls of men *and* women alike, in both England and United States. McKay's perspective is, again, *transnational*. Homelessness, in England and America after the war did, indeed, reach a crisis. While glorified as vagabonds, many of those derelicts on park benches were "fallen" comrades - radicals unable to find work or, in Eastman's case, blacklisted because of their views or conscientious objector status. Again, as with his earlier dialect and horticultural poems, McKay weaves a kind of translocality into his verse, which mediates the romantic and the modern:

⁷¹ McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, p. 11.

The vivid grass with visible delight
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth;
And butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
Chirping and dancing for the season's birth,
And dandelions and rare daffodils
That holds the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold.

And thrushes sending forth their joyous trills;
Not these, not these did I at first behold;
But, seated on the benches daubed with green,
The human derelicts, some fast asleep,
With here and there a woman wedged between,
And over all, life's shadows dark and deep:
Moaning I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not to see.

McKay's poetic eye dwells upon this lone woman who exists in "life's shadows," much as the cabaret dancer in Harlem does. (*The Shadow Women*, a novel about homeless women by Helen Zenna Smith, was popular in England at the time, and McKay may well have read it.) The poem's gaze also conjures that "ole woman" in the doorway of McKay's dialect poem, "The Biter Bite." So there is a definite literary history that links all these poems across race and geography. The poet anguishes over such poverty amid natural beauty and abundance, and grafts an uneasy Romanticism onto this modern predicament. But there are other "shadows" – veterans and those wounded in the war, for whom, too, there are no jobs.⁷² Activists and patriots – men and women together, across political divides – are now neglected and considered unpatriotic. All of nature pales when compared with this human misery that is, ironically, "daubed in green" (connoting the hollowness of capitalism as well

⁷² Unemployable veterans, particularly those maimed and psychologically wounded, was an issue in England, which had instituted compulsory military service. "The commanders who now make speeches about the virtues inculcated by military service are the very men who induced us to establish the short-service system by testifying that the old soldier was a humbug. The fact that the agencies for finding employment for discharged soldiers are still very unsuccessful shows that the young soldier is no greater a favorite, except in war pictures, than the old one was." George Bernard Shaw, ed. *Fabianism and the Empire: A Manifesto by the Fabian Society* (London: G. Richards, 1900.), p. 39.

as the temporary relief of the park benches) in mockery of their lives.

While McKay depicted the cultural poverty created by imperialism and war, Eastman, too, was doing her part to change such inertia, with tactics such as “direct action.” She was known as a skilled investigator as a result of her work on the Pittsburgh Survey, and received appointments to New York State's Commission on Employers' Liability and Causes of Industrial Accidents, Unemployment and Lack of Farm Labor, a position she used to pressure the U.S. government for the first federal workers' compensation law. She was also appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, from 1913 to 1914. But there was another side to the pragmatic labor lawyer: She was a fierce proponent of internationalism. She organized international peace and suffrage rallies and in 1913, a key year for her, and joined with Alice Paul, Lucy Burns and others in founding the Congressional Union – forerunner of the National Woman's Party. Modeled on the Women's Social and Political Union in England, which was known for its successful militant methods, Eastman soon began organizing huge demonstrations and the daily picketing at the White House.⁷³ Over the next couple of years the police arrested nearly 500 women for loitering and 168 were jailed for “obstructing traffic.” It is very easy to read another McKay poem, “The White House,” as a “report” in response to suffragettes' repeated protests at the Capitol, where they were

⁷³ In a March 1918 *Liberator* editorial, “A Militant Suffrage Victory,” Max Eastman praised the courage of Alice Paul, who was influenced by the British female hunger strikers, “and her young army of militants as one of the leading radical forces [along with the Non-Partisan League and the Socialist Party in America] in American politics in the near future. In another editorial, “Feminism,” he noted that this army, as he called it, “was composed of “the only Americans who kept up the banner of revolt throughout the reactionary hurricane of the patriotic war.” (qtd. in Max Eastman, by Milton Cantor, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970).

not taken seriously by national leaders because of their sex, and one wonders if the poem is a tribute to Crystal Eastman, who had begun using direct action tactics, such as sit-ins and hunger strikes, in suffragette's attempts at getting the vote.

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate.⁷⁴

Only in a coordinated *legal* action would "letter of the law" apply. Likewise the "pavement slabs" connote daily marches and demonstrations. "The White House" was published in 1922, long after those demonstrations, and was used by Alain Locke in his *New Negro* anthology. McKay was particularly annoyed that Locke, fearing that the poem would be considered seditious, had changed the title to "White Houses." If the poet's intention was to focus upon whites in general, then the poem's altered title would matter little. Its importance went beyond racial differences, and may have been conceived as a muted

⁷⁴ The May 1922 issue of *The Liberator* featured McKay's "Spring Sonnets," which included "Negro Spiritual," "The White House," "To the Entrenched Classes," and "The Night Fire." A note to "The White House" that appeared in the 1953 edition quotes a passage from McKay's autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, published in 1937 (pp. 313-14): "My title was symbolic... it had no reference to the official residence of the President of the United States...The title 'White Houses' changed the whole symbolic intent and meaning of the poem, making it appear as if the burning ambition of the black malcontent was to enter white houses in general." "The White House" was not included in the *Harlem Shadows* edition, possibly because it might be construed as a direct criticism of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. It was altered, we know, by Alain Locke, when he put together the 1925 issue of Survey Graphic's "New Negro." That incident seemed to have ended

tribute to those protests at the White House, which began as marches and sit-ins in 1913 and lasted up until the vote was achieved in 1920. His close friend, Crystal Eastman, and other internationalists, however, would understand the symbolism of the White House.

As war loomed in Europe and the colonies, Eastman networked with women in other countries and throughout the United States. McKay, too, became more anti-militaristic, and summed up the world situation in 1918:

looking about me with bigger and clearer eyes I saw that this cruelty in different ways was going on all over the world. Whites were exploiting and oppressing whites even as they exploited and oppressed the yellows and blacks. And the oppressed, groaning under the lash, evinced the same despicable hate and harshness toward their weaker fellows. I ceased to think of people and things in the mass – why should I fight with mad dogs only to be bitten and probably transformed into a mad dog myself? I turned to the individual soul, the spiritual leaders, for comfort and consolation. I felt and still feel that one must seek for the noblest and best in the individual life only: each soul must save itself. . . . And now this great catastrophe [World War I] has come upon the world proving the real hollowness of nationhood, patriotism, racial pride and most of the things which one was taught to respect and reverence.⁷⁵

Disturbed by the reception of his poems in America, McKay reconnected with a radical lyrical tradition on new ground that was at once English and Caribbean. In England, McKay's restless quest for authenticity would begin, but as a more measured public intellectual and seasoned lyrical poet. He was already deeply indebted to Wordsworth and Blake, and would go on to adapt the English Romantic tradition for his own identity that reflected the migrations of a colonial outcast.

the already strained relations between Locke and McKay, and he denounced Locke and the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance that he was attempting to create.

⁷⁵ Biographer Wayne Cooper believes that McKay's disillusionment with the national interests that precipitated World War I was primarily responsible for McKay's eventual conversion to and belief in Roman Catholicism. Cooper points to a letter McKay wrote in 1944: "I used to have great faith in agnosticism, up until World War I, when the German and British agnostics or rationalists lost all sense of reason, became rabid nationalists and began denouncing one another" (*Passion*, 305).

6

ENGLISH TRADITIONS AND COLONIAL HABITS

My intention was to make a voyage or two, entirely to please these my honoured patrons; but I determined that the year following, if it pleased God, I would see Old England once more, and surprise my old Master... .

- Olaudah Equiano¹

IN FEBRUARY OF 1920, WHILE REPORTING ON LABOR ACTIVITIES for the *Workers' Dreadnought* in the East End of London, the poet Claude McKay met C.K. Ogden, the English pacifist and bookshop owner who would complete the work of mentoring McKay in the ways of literary traditions and Empire that was begun by Walter Jekyll. In 1912, around the time that the young poet had published his first collection of poems, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, in Jamaica and England, Ogden resuscitated *Cambridge Magazine*.² The journal, which he put together in the early hours the night in his "fantastically cluttered attic" above a fish-processing factory, called Mac-Fisheries, in Petty Cury, was home to a younger generation of Cambridge intellectuals, who would challenge and unseat the established dons. To these radicals, who became known to the world as the Cambridge School and included the literary critic I.A. Richards among its formidable thinkers, Ogden's sparse headquarters was affectionately known as "Top Hole."³

¹ *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (Dover, 1996, p. 103)

² It was in the tradition of William Morris' *Cambridge and Oxford Magazine*, published in the mid-nineteenth century

³ I.A. Richards, "Some Recollections of C.K. Ogden," *Encounter*, September 1957, p. 11. Richards' *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment* (1929) would become the foundation for reader-response theory. Richards' method "gave the study of literature in the university a new empirical basis drawn explicitly from psychology. His detailed examination of students' written responses to sample poems enabled him to

Walter Fuller, the English poet whom McKay met in New York radical circles, through Crystal Eastman and her pacifist network, described Ogden as one of the brilliant contemporary minds in England that McKay must meet if he was to become a master of the English language, since Ogden wrote some of the authoritative texts on the subject. He was someone who worked against as well as within the establishment – and would be a bridge between McKay's outsider temperament and his insider desires. McKay, who was anxious to meet the literary editor and show him a collection of his poems, delayed a meeting with Ogden for six months. In January 1923, he forwarded a letter, as a way of introduction, from Fuller, who knew Ogden from his college years at Cambridge.⁴ In his letter, the poet admitted that his motivation in coming to Ogden and England was a selfish one, and not political. It was to produce a book written in, what he called, "literary English."⁵ Yet what united these radicals more than poetry – and provided the common meeting place – was a commitment to internationalism and pacifism.

Ogden was a charismatic figure, and fell into the mold of a public intellectual who worked at the margins. *The Cambridge Magazine* provocatively boasted that it was "prepared to accept and welcome every point of view."⁶ Like other radicals who McKay befriended,

catalogue and describe the mental processes readers used in reading and misreading texts." In J.A. Applevard, *Becoming a Reader* (New York, 1990), p. 5; quoted in Holden, p. 88.

⁴ Fuller to Ogden, November 11, 1919. McKay's letters pertaining to this period are in the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada, and have never been published.

⁵ McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. Later McKay revealed more on his plans. "It does seem as if I were in a hurry," he wrote on August 4, "but my stay here was limited from the beginning to six months and I came with the definite purpose of having the poems published. Nothing else would have kept me in England so long." McKay stayed nearly a year. William Ready.

⁶ *Cambridge Magazine*, Volume 1, No. 1 (January 20, 1912), "Ourselves," p. 1.

⁷ This seemed to be the rationale for later criticisms of Ogden's magazine. At the height of World War I, for instance, with increasingly bold critiques of the war, Cambridge newspapers questioned why such an unpatriotic journal was allowed to publish through the university. The question prompted a swift reply from

Ogden was a notorious pacifist and feminist who repeatedly engaged others over the war, in the pages of the magazine as well in the halls of Magdalene College, a place that comprised, for fellow collaborator I.A. Richards, "a lot of rot."⁸ The magazine's first editorial heralded a new age, and its pages became a battleground for "rumpuses" ("Some" 10).

We believe that the spirit which cries perpetually for a non-committal attitude is a mean one: and it is well known whither this all too often tends."⁹

Ogden viewed Cambridge differently than most academics of that era. Cambridge was the soil upon which a vast underground of dissident "dispersal camps" would root and disseminate "information for us in centres of learning both on the Continent and in America and the East." With the same determination, Ogden recruited McKay as a "correspondent" to this exciting new climate of intellectualism, and published a rich sampling of his poems.¹⁰

The magazine also espoused the new feminist internationalism of Eastman and Fuller, and expressed a revulsion of high modernism and academic mediocrity, what Ogden described as "the tyranny of grammatical good form."¹¹ Ogden's numerous collaborations with radical feminists, which led to *Militarism versus Feminism: Writings on*

faculty and students, and a petition was drafted claiming that it was "in every sense as much a University paper as any other in Oxford or Cambridge." Simply because the magazine had appeal "to a wide circle of readers outside the university does not seem to us to have any bearing on the question of its University character." ("The Cambridge Magazine" petition, undated. William Ready.)

⁸ "Now invigilating in Magdalene Hall, that gold and brown place with stairs going out of it, with coats of arms in windows, and banners hanging from the roof. Beneath the tables are the victims," wrote Richards of his teaching experience at Magdalene College. And concluded: "I now am depressed." (To D.E. Pillev, November 19, 1923, *Selected Letters of I.A. Richards*, Oxford U P, 1990), p.6.

⁹ *Cambridge Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (January 20, 1912), "Ourselves," p. 1.

¹⁰ *The Cambridge Magazine*, Volume X, No. 1 (Summer 1920).

¹¹ Ogden, "Preface," *Tales Told of Shem and Shaun: Three Fragments from Work in Progress*, by James Joyce (Black Sun Press; Paris, 1929).

Women and War, were attempts at convince feminists, so crucial to the movement, not to abandon inter-nationalism in favor of false promises by politicians to get their support of the war. Because of those views, particularly unnerving for the tradition-bound trustees at Cambridge, the magazine was held hostage to “the Blimps of those days who did their best to shoot it down with paper-rationing.”¹²

Ogden was a scholar “who knew everything,” and related broad questions of psychology, language, and culture to linguistic meaning and moral science. His interest in orthology for instance – the study of the right use of words – led to the development of Basic English, and attempts at “reforming” standard English.¹³ As Ogden envisioned it, Basic English was to be a system in opposition to Empire, “the language of Radio, the language of Africa, the language even of American business,” whose “mere advocacy demands the faith of the fanatic.” Was Claude McKay to be the first poet of Basic English rather than of the Diaspora? At the moment, for McKay and Ogden at least, those two worlds seemed temperamentally contiguous.

Today, with the entire Pacific area, to say nothing of India and Africa, in the forefront of the international picture, we can no longer regard a fully inflected system of European roots as an international solution (*System of Basic English* 11, 17).¹⁴

¹² I.A. Richards, “Some Recollections of C.K. Ogden,” *Encounter*, p. 11. This seemed to be the rationale for later criticisms of Ogden’s magazine. At the height of World War I, for instance, with increasingly bold critiques of the war, Cambridge newspapers questioned why such an unpatriotic journal was allowed to publish through the university. The question prompted a swift reply from faculty and students, and a petition was drafted claiming that it was “in every sense as much a University paper as any other in Oxford or Cambridge.” (“The Cambridge Magazine” petition, undated. William Ready.)

¹³ Christine Holden and David M. Levy, “From Emotionalized Language to Basic English: The Career of C.K. Ogden and/as ‘Adelvine More’,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 27:1 (Spring 2001), p. 81.

¹⁴ Ogden his forays into mass communication, colonial poetics, and de-emotionalizing language has special resonance today, particularly with regard to the Internet and simplified global English. It is not coincidental that George Orwell, the author of the 1984, became a leading proponent of a “de-emotionalized” language in the 1930s, a time of authoritarian threats from the right and left. “The instrument – global English” note

The polymath's vast knowledge impressed McKay, who maintained a furious relationship in this one-year period, meeting at political and literary clubs and writing regularly about race, politics and, of course, the progress of the poet's debut in the craft of literary English, the chapbook *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems*, published by Grant Richards Ltd. Ogden's scientific range was vast, and he would go on to produce, collaboratively with Richards and James Wood, *The Meaning of Psychology* (1926), *Debabelization, with a Survey of Opinion* (1931), and *Basic English versus the Artificial Languages*. He co-authored with Mary Sargant Florence and her son Philip a series on war and feminism. His interest in language and meaning brought him to Ludwig Wittgenstein and he translated *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922, prefaced by Bertrand Russell) in addition to other works, that interested him, such as H. Deisch's *The History and Theory of Vitalism* (1914) and Romain Rolland's *Above the Battle* (1916) and *The Idols* (1915). (His letters to Ludwig Wittgenstein can be found in *Letters to C. K. Ogden with Comments on the English Translation of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Boston, Routledge & K. Paul, 1973.)

The other half to McKay's relationship with Ogden was the literary critic I.A. Richards, who wrote a preface to *Spring in new Hampshire*. Richards met Ogden at Magdalene College in 1911, and recalled how his mentor "frightened me horribly" with his

Christine Holden and David M. Levy, "which Ogden focused his energies on in the attempt to make international communications more transparent is something we observe around us. The many voices lamenting the losses, which accompany language death, while understandable for what they mourn, seem not to recognize that Ogden's work is something with which they must argue. Does not a common language reduce dangers of misunderstanding? And surely an Ogden who lived through World War I and the 30s, and Orwell who had experienced World War II and the consolidation of Soviet power in Eastern Europe, were not alone in wishing to reduce misunderstandings, both in personal and political terms" (Holden, p. 105).

encyclopedic mind.¹⁵ At that moment, the undergraduate was having a moral crisis and “in trouble after a term or so of history.”

I found myself possessed by some heartfelt objection to reading any more of it and . . . begging to be allowed to try something else” (“Some” 11).

Although three years younger than Ogden, a passion for minutiae and the offbeat united them, with Wood as the third rail, to collaborate on *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), *The System of Basic English*, and *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, all of which challenged English modernism and hegemony – the exactness of the work, particularly *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards likened to “a frustrating cold in the head.”¹⁶ Ogden became a reliable confidant and co-conspirator against the establishment. Richards (and later McKay) frequently asked his opinion and advice, and eventually grew to appreciate his colleague’s political quirks.¹⁷ Ogden immediately Richards to “Top Hole,” where he became acquainted with *Cambridge Magazine* and the intellectuals that formed around the Heretics. The only criteria for membership, Ogden explained, was “rejection of all appeal to Authority” (I.A. Richards, Russo 95). As its “president,” Ogden became “the organizer of Heresy,” and the group, which functioned like the Apostles and other Cambridge secret societies, but departed drastically in terms of political and sexual orientation, discussed topics that were often causes that Ogden believed in deeply: academic reform, civil

¹⁵ Richards to Ogden, June 13, 1918. William Ready.

¹⁶ “Some,” p. 12. When *The Foundations of Aesthetics* appeared in 1922 in England (1925 in New York, International Publishers) McKay was editor of the *Liberator* and tried to parlay to his American readers the importance of Ogden’s work. Max Eastman would have nothing to do with assigning a review or commissioning an article. “Max is not interested in an international esthetic of the arts. He is strangely individualistic. He is interested in a revolutionary expression of art in a general way, but does not go beyond that.” McKay to Ogden, October 2, 1921. William Ready.

¹⁷ Ogden’s impact, particularly regarding internationalism, was long lasting. Years later when he was teaching at Harvard, Richards was asked if he was a political person. “I am, I suppose, apolitical,” he replied, “seeing

liberties, internationalism, women's suffrage, coeducation, adult education, syndicalism, psychoanalysis, and birth control (Russo 95). They began to share the same quirky rebelliousness and devotion to the Romantics, which inspired Richards to reassess one of the central figures of that movement, Samuel Coleridge.¹⁸ These Cambridge intellectuals, close in age and temperament, would help McKay to "claim a place beside the best work that the present generation is producing" in Britain.¹⁹ At Ogden's request, Richards was asked to assess the Jamaican poet's "straight English" verse.

Another collaborator, Philip Sargent Florence, son of the famous painter and suffragist (and who later edited a "collective" biography of Ogden, explained that the owlish book collector (book-collecting was a political act used by Ogden to hinder the war effort's demand for paper) went out of his way to inflame the older Cambridge intellectuals. He particularly was outraged by the inequality of women, and became vocal in assaulting this wall of silence, as Virginia Woolf characterized it, that kept academic representation tightly wrapped. Against the prevailing wisdom, Ogden espoused co-education as a solution to gender inequity. "Oxford, Cambridge and the Church alone deny the principle of equal opportunity and keep women in a position of Pauline subjection," wrote one *Cambridge Magazine* correspondent. When he formed the Heretics, soon after he began *Cambridge Magazine*, Ogden "took it for granted that women undergraduates should be equal members of the Society and its government."²⁰ Woolf's A

that the only politics that interest me are world politics." ("Fundamentally, I'm an Inventor," interview by Jane Watkins, *Harvard Magazine* 76, September 1973, p. 50; qtd. in Russo, p. 160)

¹⁸ I.A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1962).

¹⁹ *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* (London: Richards, 1920).

²⁰ The historian Eileen Powers wrote on "Women's Degrees" in the June 1920 issue of *Cambridge Magazine*, p. 8. P. Sargent Florence, and J.R.L. Anderson, eds. *C.K. Ogden: A Collective Memoir* (London: Elek Pemberton,

Room of One's Own, published in 1929, humorously described the dons at Cambridge as "creased and crushed into shapes so singular that one was reminded of those giant crabs and crayfish who heave with difficulty across the sand of an aquarium," which changed little in ten years.²¹ Ogden's irreverence toward this cherished "sanctuary" and his unabashed antimilitarism provided the convenient excuse, among colleagues, to minimize his importance in language and culture, which included his exchanges with McKay. Richards later remarked that Cambridge simply "did not like his attitude to the war"—or the company he kept, whether feminism and women's suffrage, trade unionism and syndicalism, international peace, educational reform, atheism and birth control, or African art.²² It was a trait that many who knew him, such as Fuller, Richards and Wood, and "outsiders," such as the Jamaican McKay, found inspiring.²³ "There also was in him," Richards commented, "behind his freaks and humours - a central clarifying insistence, a flame of curiosity and impatience, a disdain for the acquiescences of sloth, a trust in mind, which, even as an undergraduate, made him one of the forces of his time" ("Some" 10-11).

Disagreement over the war and the increasing mediocrity at Cambridge took Ogden to London, where he produced and edited two series, "The International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method" and a "History of Civilization." Ogden traveled to Cambridge only on weekends to meet with Richards and Wood, and spent the

1977), p. 58; qtd. in *Militarism versus Feminism*, p. 23). In a January 27, 1912, *Cambridge Magazine* editorial, Ogden issued a call for a social club at Cambridge "where the academic or political exclusiveness of the existing institutions is avoided."

²¹ *A Room of One's Own*, Chapter 1; qtd in Norton, p. 2156.

²² Quoted in *Militarism versus Feminism*, p. 24; C.K. Ogden: *A Collective Memoir*, p.233.

²³ McKay was also "perversely intolerant of civilized culture," he wrote Ogden in 1922 from New York. "There is something in me that would laugh to see even the things that I love most destroyed." McKay to Ogden, William Ready.

rest of his time in London. His home in Soho, near Club 1917, where the Bloomsbury circle met, was filled like “a curiosity shop,” according to his biographer John Paul Russo, with ticking clocks that gave different times, musical boxes and African masks that Ogden sometimes used as part of his peculiar masquerade (96). Since the Armistice – November 11, 1918 hardly signaled the end of peace activism for radical – there were “countless commitments,” according to Richards, that kept Ogden in London, such as an interest in colonial issues. In London he met with Claude McKay, and experienced the world of expatriation and diaspora. Increasingly colonials and expatriates from other countries were making London their home. For Ogden, this “acquired” English of McKay and other colonials, who were making London their home in increasing numbers, was a theoretical puzzle. He wanted to know the evolution of this language; it stops and starts, its texture and rhythm. With McKay, he saw the challenge how creating a new language, which would more accurately reflect the new forces of the colonial. (In the same way, Ogden characterized James Joyce a representative of this ideology of the environmental, “though he can write standard English and lives in Paris, is neither an Englishman nor a Parisian.”) Little did he realize that this ideology would embrace diaspora and hybridity.²⁴

²⁴ Ogden, preface, *Tales Told of Shem and Shaun*, p. iv.

McKAY DID NOT MENTION IN HIS LETTERS TO OGDEN THAT A COLLECTION OF POEMS had already been published in England, by a feminist socialist collective in the East End of London.²⁵ That collection, "Sonnets and Songs," appeared in the *Workers' Dreadnought*, the radical newspaper edited by the well-known suffragist Sylvia Pankhurst.²⁶ It also made the rounds in *The Liberator*, coincidentally edited by another suffragist, Crystal Eastman, who was the managing editor. McKay's poems debuted September 6, 1919, a short time before he arrived by steamer in October. Eastman had been in close contact with Ogden about McKay's arrival as well, and wrote McKay on several occasions to inquire about the progress of his book. These radicals were united in the cause of pacifism - and McKay reflected their hope and desires for a new esthetic and literature. Pankhurst and Eastman were also acquainted through their previous work in the suffrage movement, but had more beyond that ideology to become more internationalist. The *Dreadnought* reproduced all of the poems in "Sonnets and Songs" - "The Barrier," "After the Winters," "The Little Peoples," "A Roman Holiday," and of course "If We Must Die." McKay was introduced to English readers as "a Negro of Jamaica," whose exciting experiences abroad were those of "a waiter in an American dining car." Pankhurst, it seemed, like Ogden, played the willing

²⁵ McKay also had a poem published in *T.J. Weekly* in the issue of 1912. The poem was written in dialect, and appeared around the same time as *Songs of Jamaica*.

²⁶ The *Women's Dreadnought* became *The Workers' Dreadnought* in 1917. (See Davis 55). ²⁶ Like Ogden, the militant suffragist Pankhurst wrote on a variety of topics that interested her: *Education of the Masses* (1924), *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War* (1932), *Housing and the Workers' Revolution: Housing in Capitalist Britain and Bolshevik Russia* (1917, 1925), *The Suffrage Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (1931), and *Writ on Cold Slate* (1922), a collection of prison poems.

host to the colonial, and helped to aid the poet's extraordinary "set of verses" reach sympathetic readers among the new internationalists.²⁷

Yet, here too, he was met by radical resistance. McKay, as was his style, cloaked himself in the rough garb of an anonymous proletariat in addressing a series of racist attacks in the *Herald* (a newspaper that espoused radical ideas and was published by Labour Party leader George Lansbury, who happened to be a suffragist and friend of the Pankhursts), under the banner "Black Troops Terror" (*Dreadnought*, April 24, 1920; qtd. in Davis 104). When an editorial, possibly penned by Lansbury, insinuated that if "savages" (the term he used for African soldiers) were used in Germany, why then "not against workers here and elsewhere," McKay was shocked.²⁸ The poet politely hailed Lansbury comradely, "from one radical to another" - and assumed, in his epistolary diatribe, the English identity of a Cardiff Negro, "one of the oppressed," he commented sarcastically in his letter to the editor, a clear reference to the colonial condition at home in the motherland. He went on to explain that "it was the duty of his paper as a radical organ to enlighten its readers about the reason why the English considered coloured troops undesirable in Europe" (*A Long Way from Home* 75; qtd. in Davis 105).²⁹ He condemned Lansbury for "appealing to illogical emotional prejudices." He was outraged that Lansbury, a one-time candidate for the Women's Suffrage Party, would accuse blacks as being

²⁷ McKay's experiences at *The Liberator* were not as cordial. In October 1921 when Max traveled to Russia, he bypassed Dell and made Mike Gold and McKay executive editors. Eastman probably thought he was wedding the new proletarian politics with the New Negro outlook, but it was an unworkable relationship for everyone. Dell and McKay were unable to work with Gold, and McKay resigned a year later in June 1922. In October 1924, with Gold still at the helm, *The Liberator* merged with *The Labor Herald* and *Soviet Russian Pictorial* to become *The Workers Monthly*. (see *Floyd Dell*, by John E. Hart, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1971).

²⁸ "Quoted in Marv Davis, *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics*; *Herald*, April 10, 1920.

²⁹ Lansbury's involvement with the suffrage movement, however, seemed exemplary. He was a candidate on the Women's Suffrage Party ticket in London's East End.

counter-revolutionary and anti-Labour. If it wasn't so close, McKay would have shrugged it off. But Lansbury was a fellow radical in the tradition. He felt obliged to correct such faulty thinking.

McKay's attack was political as well as playful, and he added a twist of irony in alluding to the larger colonial picture. An avid theatergoer (and an avid reader of Shakespeare and Shaw as well) McKay knew the significance of the port city of Wales, from Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, which was considered "the sort of drama the extreme wing of the radicals would thrill to most."¹⁰ But Lansbury missed the allusion. He, instead, was more concerned with keeping the "Cardiff negro" out of his newspaper. (it was McKay's lot to be always misunderstood for his subtleties.) Lansbury's refusal to air McKay's grievance in the *Herald*, I believe, provided Pankhurst the opportunity to put *her* politics to work (Lansbury and her were a way rivals). For the newer generation of radicals such as Ogden and Pankhurst, feminists and pacifists, the writing on the wall was clearly legible - a new perspective and esthetic was needed.

An influence upon these cultural insurgents was the radical philosopher Victoria Lady Welby, god-daughter of Queen Victoria, who became known for a theory of linguistics that found meaning in what she termed "significs" (the theoretical forerunner of semiotics and structuralism). Welby's theory was more integrative. "The mutual deafness, dumbness and blindness which is the mental condition of our 'Modern Babel,'" she

¹⁰ Charles W. Wood, "Is Seeing Believing and Other Questions," *Masses*, January 1917; qtd. in *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911-1917*. Playwright's Theater, a part of the Provincetown Players founded by Heterodoxy Club member Susan Gaspell, provided space to a then-unknown O'Neill, and McKay may have gotten word of its opening through the Heterodoxy Club network that included acquaintances Crystal Eastman, Rose Pastor Stokes, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Ida Rauh, roommate and later wife to Max

noted, was the underpinning for war. "Few things indeed would be likely to do more to further the prospects of universal peace," she explained, than the improvement of language and communication "between all civilized nations."³¹ Welby's sentiments pervade Richards' essay on "The Symbolist Movement," and Ogden's attempts at "de-emotionalizing" language of its "Word-Magic," which was the cause of its militant seduction. "The power of print over simple minds," as the linguist commented later.³²

A meeting between McKay and Pankhurst was arranged, and an offer of a staff position on the *Dreadnought* followed.³³ Ogden sensed he was onto something too: McKay would help to revitalize the English language and culture with the "straight English" of an ex-colonial with peasant roots in the Caribbean, educated in Jamaica and America, a representative of an emerging *cosmopolis*. McKay mailed Ogden a collection of poems that he composed in a resort town in New Hampshire, and not those he composed while in New York (although he included a sampling later). He emphasized to Ogden that his time

Eastman. (See *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village, 1912- 1940*, by Judith Schwarz (Norwood, Vermont: New Victoria Publishers, 1986).

³¹ Qtd in the preface, *What Is Meaning*, by Victoria Lady Welby (rept. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1983); originally in Welby, *Grains of Sense* (1897).

³² "The Symbolist Movement" debuted in the summer June 1920 issue of *Cambridge Magazine* in which Claude McKay's "Poems" appeared. In Ogden's preface to James Joyce's *Tales Told of Shem and Shaun* (Black Sun Press; Paris, 1929), the linguist also found fault with, "The perseveration of Print, the authority of the Authorised Version, the convenience of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, the standardization of the English Public Schools, and the exigencies of Fleet Street," p. i.

³³ Both Marv Davis, in *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics*, and Patricia W. Romero, in *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical*, are in error on two keys issues regarding McKay's involvement with the *Dreadnought*. McKay did not make his official debut at the *Dreadnought* as the radical "Cardiff negro" on April 24, 1920 when his letter appeared, but in the fall of 1919, when a rich sampling of his work was published in the *Dreadnought's* pages. Such a starting point for the radical ex-colonial embellishes Pankhurst's reputation, but does little for McKay as a struggling poet. By neglecting to mention the debut of his poems in the September 1919 issue of the *Dreadnought*, McKay's poetic worth was clearly downplayed. Likewise, Romero notes that McKay never received a byline while a reporter for the *Dreadnought* - yet both his poetry and commentaries were displayed prominently with his name. Occasionally he wrote under a pseudonym, but that was common with many writers of the day, including his mentor C.K. Ogden.

was short, but that he “*must* remain here until it is published.”³⁴ McKay later remarked in his *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, a semi-autobiographical work written while he lived in Morocco, that “Someday I would write poetry in straight English and amaze and confound them.”³⁵ That day seemed to have arrived.

It was Fuller’s letter to Ogden, dated November 1919, that planted the seed of intrigue. “Mr. McKay,” he wrote, “is a poet of some distinction over here.”³⁶ The relationship was collaborative, much like that of Ezra Pound to Eliot in shaping and rewriting *The Waste Land*. But for Ogden collaboration had a political meaning as well – of diminishing authorial control of language. Ogden was rare in that he also welcomed female collaboration and took women’s intellectual work seriously. This intellectual engagement had a profound effect on McKay’s image of himself as a poet and thinker. Ogden had the poetic spirit, the rebelliousness, and the iconoclasm that would match McKay’s own restless drive. As he had done with Richards and others, Ogden began mentoring the poet in “word magic.” The two were in their late twenties, and also shared a passion for the Romantics, as well as nightly walks. Interestingly, both loved the intrigue of “impersonations” and anonymity. “London,” McKay explained, “I have always wanted to know. When I was a boy I wrote a bit of dialect verse to that effect.” Now McKay wanted to

³⁴ McKay to Ogden, August 7, 1920. William Ready. McKay had several patrons who were responsible for his trip to England, and who encouraged him to find a London publisher. One was J.L.J.F. Ezerman, a Dutch bibliophile, the others I suspect were Walter Fuller, an English poet himself, and Crystal Eastman, who first came upon McKay’s verses in New York in 1919, and helped to publish them in the *Dreadnought* a few months later. McKay explained to Ogden: “When I write to my friends in Holland and America, who were responsible for my being here to publish, that I was returning to America before the book was out, they strongly objected and showed how that would really defeat my object in coming over.”

³⁵ *My Green Hills of Jamaica*.

³⁶ Fuller to Ogden, November 1919. William Ready.

see "the face of that soul." ¹⁷ The city was "where poets should publish" if they wanted to know and understand that soul, McKay concluded.

While McKay's collaborated with Ogden in the evenings, he spent his days at the *Dreadnought*. He worked at a salary that barely paid the rent, but was given tremendous freedom to explore the contours of a Commonwealth diaspora. "The association with Pankhurst put me in the nest of extreme radicalism in London," McKay remarked, though he probably found the nest exciting. (*A Long Way from Home* 76-9). As with Ogden, Pankhurst showed a willingness to engage in this new diasporic discourse in her newspaper. Her idea of Africa and Ethiopia as revolutionary salvation, for instance, was shared by McKay, and she would become one of feminism's first "Pan-Africanists." ¹⁸ Periodically, McKay filled in for Pankhurst as an editor. He explained to Ogden, "I shall be out of town most of the time the first of August when I shall begin to help Sylvia Pankhurst with her paper for a few weeks until she returns from her vacation." Ogden was concerned for his safety: "It is O.K.," he was assured, "I won't get into any trouble." ¹⁹ Since black British history is a new field, it would be well to recognize that in the late teens and 1920s some white radicals in Britain supported black intellectuals.

McKay acted as a cultural go-between for both Ogden, in terms of dialect and the primitive, and Pankhurst, in his insight into the colonial situation. Both Ogden and Pankhurst were initiated into the "sordid" world (as McKay termed it sarcastically) of the International Club and Institute, which was "full of excitement, with dogmatists and

¹⁷ "Up To Date," p. 1-2. Harry Ransom.

¹⁸ Romero, E. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical*.

¹⁹ McKay to Ogden, June 19, 1920. William Ready.

doctrinaires of radical left ideas." It reminded one of "a little piece of foreign territory on English soil," and McKay soon fell in with "a nice little group that stuck together."⁴⁰ McKay also visited another club on Drury Lane "for colored men, chiefly demobilised soldiers." This one, too, was "a very interesting conglomeration of West Indian and American and African, Negroes and Mulattoes, Egyptians, and Arabs and a few Indians," McKay reported.⁴¹ "There were some boxers among them, and once I invited them to the International Socialist Club (of which I had become a member) to give an exhibition."⁴² McKay, it turns out, *was* quite the pugilist (Shaw was partly correct in his advice to the poet), and impressed Ogden by describing how he sent a South African "sprawling to the street."⁴³ Among the rough and tumble, McKay acquired his background material for *Home to Harlem*.

Ogden also brought McKay into the respectability of the Bloomsbury circle, inviting him to the proper and politically correct 1917 club. But McKay eventually enticed Ogden to the less refined and earthy International Club and Institute, a mongrel incubator of diversity and expatriation. McKay told the editor that was staying "with a German family in a hideous gutter street near the Angel" - which he himself didn't mind, but which Ogden might find objectionable. (McKay neglected to mention that *only* German, French,

⁴⁰ McKay introduced Sylvia Pankhurst to the English membership at the International Club, where she became acquainted with "Socialists, Communists, anarchists, syndicalists, one-big-unionists and trade unionists, soap-boxers, and protesters, scribblers, and editors of little radical sheets." "Up to Date," p. 24. Harry Ransom; *A Long Way from Home*, p. 68.

⁴¹ McKay to Cunard, April 30, 1932. Harry Ransom.

⁴² "Up To Date," p. 3. Harry Ransom.

⁴³ "I was walking home from the Socialist Club with a young Serbian friend," McKay explained of the encounter, "and just as we said goodbye a drunken South African soldier (discharged) came up to me and asked whether I came from Basutoland or some other place. I announced no and tried to pass but he held me up, got hold of my tie, and was rather threatening. Of course I know what the average S.A. white thinks

and Italian families rented to him. A French landlord, whom he later met through the Institute, explained that "English neighbors had taunted her about having a black person in her house.") ⁴⁴ McKay characterized his club as "quite a sordid place" which had "no conveniences for private talk." That, however, may have been an exaggeration, and, anyway, would not have deterred Ogden. The club, which dated to 1849, had lectures, concerts, and dances. There were *always* "group discussions of social problem" and the poet boasted that the institute attracted "outstanding interesting personalities" whom McKay admired: "street corner orators, British members of the I.W.W., wartime prisoners, deportees from America, proletarian poets and certain individuals who were suspected of being spies and agents-provocateurs" – a cross-section of the disenfranchised.⁴⁵ Would Ogden object? The poet was polite, but firm: "any of these two would do for me." ⁴⁶

When they did meet at 1917, there would be embarrassed elisions and unexpected unexpected intrusions. Once, dining with Sydney Olivier's daughter and Ogden at the 1917 Club, an "extreme left fellow" butted into their conversation as McKay was explaining his fears about returning to the U.S. because he was still a member of the I.W.W. He was questioned about his radical credentials and crude racial remarks followed. "I could understand anyone intruding at the Socialist Club, but at the 1917!" McKay wrote quite flustered, "it quite beats me." The incident, though, had shaken Ogden, and McKay tried to console him.

of the blacks and what was evidently working in his sodden brain so I thought quickly." McKay to Ogden, April 2, 1920. William Ready.

⁴⁴ "Up To Date," p. 2. Harry Ransom.

⁴⁵ "Up To Date," p. 4. Harry Ransom.

⁴⁶ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready.

I am always coming up against his type and worse, in America and also here, so I'm used to it. My colour alone makes me so conspicuous; I must reconcile myself to such things. I shouldn't mind if such encounters were only amusing and tiresome, but at times they are positively dangerous.⁴⁷

McKay's work at the *Dreadnought* involved interpreting "foreign newspapers from America, India, Australia and other parts of the British Empire," he explained, especially when "imperialism got drunk and went wild among the native peoples."⁴⁸ At the *Dreadnought*, the poet had freedom to assign and cover issues, the only caveat that it be pro-labor. "The other male-controlled radical groups," boasted the poet, "were quite hostile to the Pankhurst group and its rather hysterical militancy." But Pankhurst, he pointed out, "had a personality as picturesque and passionate as any radical in London," and differed from her male radicals by her renewed commitment to internationalism, especially in those early postwar years.

Writing for an international radical mixed-race audience in Pankhurst's London *Dreadnought*, Claude McKay became a public intellectual. His apprenticeship was over. He became a serious spokesman for internationalism and an important anti-imperialist voice. In his reports, McKay explored the social texture of London, and added a "colonial perspective" to the paper. McKay saw the capitalist problem as part of the *dynamics* of empire-building, much as Olivier did. The poet offered a colonial "critique" that stressed self-determination, a sticky problem for radicals in England, who were unable to let go of Britain (Scotland, Ireland, Wales) or the Commonwealth.

Some English Communists have remarked to me that they have no real sympathy for the Irish or Indian movement because it is nationalistic. But today, the British

47 McKay to Ogden, March 26; April 2, 1920. William Ready.

48 Patricia W. Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical*, Yale U P, 1987; *A Long Way from Home* 76-79).

Empire is the greatest obstacle to International Socialism, and any of its subjugated parts succeeding in breaking away from it would be helping the cause of World Communism.

As with Lansbury, McKay scolded British radicals who espoused a revolution while they were sedated with “cheap and raw materials by the slaves of Asia and Africa for the industries of their overcrowded cities.” McKay also was aware of the destruction of nature, from his childhood memories of deforestation. While other lands are denuded, the “broad, fertile acres of Great Britain” are inaccessible to the masses, preserved for “hunting and other questionable pleasures.”⁴⁹ As a colonial, McKay resented being put to a higher standard, while others were more pragmatic. He later explained to Nancy Cunard,

I hate oppression of subject races and peoples, because it either emasculates the oppressed or diverts the energy they should pour into artistic and cultural channels into political propaganda and struggles for independence. This, changed a little, could also sum up my attitude towards class struggle and revolution.⁵⁰

Few intellectuals were in agreement with this perspective, *pace* Lansbury, Max Eastman, Mike Gold, and others. Yet he found comrades in Ogden and Pankhurst, who not only celebrated his poetry, but respected his opinions as well. Ogden plied McKay with numerous questions about dialect, language, and the colonies. Both Ogden and Pankhurst were convinced of the significance of this “new force.” In a Christmas 1917 issue, for instance, she shifted the concerns of the *Dreadnought* (published since 1914 as a woman’s radical newspaper) to unionism, Fabian socialism, and colonial issues. It included an article by Shaw on “democracy,” and a piece by the Italian anarchist Silvio Corio on “Italy and Her Future.” The revolution in Russia had just gotten underway (in March), but by far unresolved colonial issues of Empire were on the front burner. The British Labour

movement, for instance, was being analyzed against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution (a focus the American publisher Paul U. Kellogg used his 1919 *British Labor and the War: Reconstructors for a New World*).⁵¹

Sylvia's mother and sister, who were staunchly separatists in their feminism, were puzzled by the *Dreadnought's* pro-labour stand. But it was WWI and pacifism that eventually divided them (and Ogden from the older men who were educated at "Oxbridge"). Her sister Christabel Pankhurst, for instance, encouraged women to have a "greater political radius" than to be merely interested in the vote, particularly in time of war – a sentiment supported by her mother. But that radius involved patriotism and female moral support. Christabel and mother would later denounce "Bolshevik agitators and traitorous pacifists," which included Sylvia, McKay and her circle.⁵²

McKay plumbed a tradition that was rich in Romantic metaphors, international events and literary and political personalities, a "hybrid" style that delighted the Cambridge editor and East end feminist alike. Pankhurst and Ogden, however, were reluctant to shape that sensibility, as previous generations had done. Ogden rarified McKay's poetic voice, so that those colonial and racial "personas" would glide safely along, expressing cultural wholeness rather than the anger of discrimination and jive racial stereotyping which he found in America.

⁴⁹ "Socialism and the Negro," *Workers' Dreadnought* (January 31, 1920), p. 1-2.

⁵⁰ McKay to Cunard, September 18, 1932. Harry Ransom.

⁵¹ Both Pankhurst and McKay agreed with Shaw who believed that change would come from the bottom up, not imposed by an elite: "the difficulty about governing with the consent of the people," noted Shaw, "is that the people will not consent to being governed at all." *Women's Dreadnought*, December 1917.

⁵² Christabel Pankhurst, "The Great Need of Vigorous National Defence Against the German Peril," quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, September 9, 1915.

Without dogmatism or any direct method you have shown me the key in which I should do my best work. It has been a great experience for I now feel that I have a sound standard for artistic endeavor."⁵³

THOSE ENGLISH POEMS THAT WERE PUBLISHED IN THE DREADNOUGHT, such as "Travail" and "Joy in the Woods," show a remarkably off-colored texture, and are unlike the bolder strokes of "To the White Fiend," "The White House," or "Dominant White," written in America, which self-consciously point to black-white differences.⁵⁴ Ogden had a hand in moving McKay away from a purely racial esthetic, I believe. Thus, the dominant tones in "Travail" are crimson and scarlet, evoking the feminist tradition; the struggle not so much over white or black, but over old and new voices. Europe, "the raven," spreads his pinions; the toiler, in the position of the yielding female, bents to her mighty task.

The crimson rides the universal wind,
The raven spreads his pinions, follows after,
The eagles, leaden-winged, are left behind;
The old foundations shake from sill to rafter
Deaf to the doubters' jeers, the weaklings means,
The toilers, tired of yielding and false giving,
Bend to the mighty task, with solacing groans,
Of making the earth fit for human living . . .
My ear is tuned unto new voices shrieking
Their jarring notes of life-exalting strife;
My soul soars singing, with flame forces seeking
The grandest purpose, noblest path of life;
Where scarlet pennants blaze like tongues of fire,
There - where high passion swells - is my heart's desire.

⁵³ McKay to Ogden, January 31, 1921. William Ready.

⁵⁴ "Travail" appeared in the January 10, 1920 issue of the *Dreadnought*; "Joy in the Woods" April 10, 1920.

Crimson and scarlet reign as dominant colors, a significance that would not have been lost upon Pankhurst, Eastman, and other internationalist feminists, and is personified as riding “the universal wind.” It also is a plant – a weed of the most common, durable variety of clover – and the poet makes connections, esthetically, to earlier horticultural concerns in Jamaica. But now those references are more sophisticated. “Crimson” implies sacrifice, death, and rebirth, particularly after the failure of the revolution of 1917 and subsequent international unrest in 1919 (the executions in Germany of Rosa Luxemburg and other activists; the race riots in St. Louis and elsewhere). It is a passionate response to thwarted revolutionary hopes. The “raven,” a prophecy of doom, “follows after.” But is there a future in the wake of this “universal wind,” where “eagles,” possibly a reference to Germany, “leaden-winged, are left behind”? McKay seems to be associating death with rebirth – a kind of social phoenix arising out of American and English rule, where the “old foundations shake” under a natural cycle of change. Such a view resonates in many of McKay’s poems, such as “Baptism” and “In the Hospital,” in which his body – as a signifier for blackness and colonial subjectivity – is acted upon like a large cultural canvass.

Natural and revolutionary forms merge for the unnamed multitudes (much as McKay grafts a new esthetic onto English ones). The catalyst is land, and “toilers” and “earth” bend inexorably in their “mighty task” together. Amid this din, the poet’s ears are like antenna, attuned “unto new voices”; and his “soul soars singing” at the poem’s end. Crimson dissolves into shades of scarlet pennants that “blaze like tongues of fire” at the poem’s end, conjuring both a sexual and political convergence – one that McKay sought as

a solution to *difference* and *hierarchy*. “Crimson” and “scarlet” also connote the body and the spirit, the sinned and sacrificed – merge, as do all earthly toilers, whether peasants, workers, women, children, men. As with an enigmatic Wordsworthian “purpose,” we never fully find out if “scarlet pennants” mean gender liberation, sexual freedom, or redemption; and one is reminded of the subtle literary allusion to the “scarlet pennant” attached to clothing in Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*. In McKay’s case, one easily moves across esthetics and genres, as much as around the fervor of the red flag of internationalism socialism.

The body and desires clash, again, in “Battle,” which also appeared that same year in the *Dreadnought*. But this battle is in a poetic arena of allegory, where “earth is ruled by man’s imperial power” and the poet’s body is a killing field.⁵⁵ McKay returns to a dream motif (first used in his poem, “A Dream,” written in 1911, but popularized among many writers of African descent, particularly in America). Yet this dream is not of the racial future, as we find in Langston Hughes’ “A Dream Deferred,” but of the tormented present.

Last night I dreamed that in the deadly strife,
Where privileged power rules with ruthless might,
I saw my body, a corpse still breathing life,
Trampled and mangled, a bloody, blackened sight.
If such should be my fate, I pray it will
Come to me sudden-swift, a keen sword-dart,
The rhythmic beat of my rebellious heart.
So, I should have the grand end come to me,
While following the only way of duty
And questing for the soul of truth and beauty!
I’d go convinced that there could never be
A fairer life for truth or beauty’s flower,
While earth is ruled by man’s imperial power.

As in other poems, McKay assumes a female victim stance, where the earth is being destroyed by “man’s imperial power.” The poem is universal, much like “If We Must Die.”

And there are no racial markers. Yet “blackened sight” points to a racial boundary, and outline of physicality. More importantly, McKay’s “battle” is not only about the political, but the personal. The poem was printed in an October 9 issue of the *Dreadnought* (under the pseudonym Hugh Hope), and coincided the publication of *Spring in New Hampshire*. Compelled to navigate the shoals of truth and beauty, the poet’s duty is to a higher calling (a calling to which both Ogden and Douglass, across miles of ocean and temperaments, responded). Conscious that *Spring in New Hampshire* would be read by reviewers of varying political persuasions, McKay found it necessary to cloak his identity; the pseudonym had less to do with the inferiority of the work, than McKay’s shrewd marketing sense.

McKay’s “blackened sight” (that has been shaped by beating rather than birth) becomes a “site” of cultural encounter. Several layers of metaphors – like grafts of skin – enfold his “body.” Racial and colonial differences poke at an uncompromising Romantic tradition. McKay writes the personal as political, much as he viewed the political as sexual; in this instance, however, the body, disengendered, is a reflection of a larger engorged “imperial power.” McKay makes the ultimate sacrifice toward Douglass’ utopian terrain of racial intermediacy: his body. Hazel Carby noted the national dimensions of this body, and used the illustration of how Paul Robeson’s body was claimed as a symbol by Americans. Robeson’s body became a synecdoche for black creativeness and acceptability.

A sort of sublimation of what the Negro may be in the Golden Age hangs about him, and imparts to his appearances an atmosphere of affection and delight that is seldom felt in an American audience. . . . Six feet two and one-half inches tall, twenty-seven years old, black as the Ace of Spades, he is a man of outstanding gifts

⁵⁵ *Workers' Dreadnought*, October 9, 1920 (Hugh Hope).

and of noble physical strength and beauty. His figure on the slave block, in The Emperor Jones, is remembered like a bronze of ancient mold.⁵⁶

McKay, aware of those forces, sought self-immolation and martyrdom instead. The rhythmic beating of his heart – much like the raven in “Travail” – evokes a macabre reality that Edgar Allen Poe, in his use of the imagery of the raven, described. “Flower” pivots “power” in metrical balance, but such a binary works differently in McKay’s diasporic sensibility. The “grand end should come to me,” McKay writes, preferring self-immolation to a false belief in prophets of hope. His is the “fairer life” that prevails against “ruthless might.” In contrast, “The Choice,” which appeared in *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems*, is less self-pitying even though his body continues to be a site of struggle. Yet McKay was more optimistic:

Although weak, I must also do my part to keep my poor people awake and discontented. I hope that wherever they are they won’t act foolishly and let themselves be mowed down and bombed by the military.⁵⁷

McKay’s language is simultaneously Romantic *and* socialist-feminist – a convergence of twentieth-century women’s issues with eighteen-century Romantic notions of rebellion. Colonial injustice is also added to this mix. Like Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” McKay’s “high passion” swells in search of a political remedy.

“To ‘Holy’ Russia” is another poem that addresses those hopes and fears that were embodied in the fragile 1917 revolution; whose early momentum united feminists, reformers, and anarchists.⁵⁸ Although he wrote a number of poems that celebrated the Russia experiment, “To ‘Holy’ Russia” was written before his visit in 1922. He refers to

⁵⁶ Quoted in a 1926 *New Republic* article. *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1998), p. 48.

⁵⁷ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready.

"ruined commonweal," implying the destruction wrought by British imperialism and the disintegration of indigenous autonomy.⁵⁹ But a way into the subtext is an understanding of the irony in the space around "Holy."

Long struggling under the Imperial heel,
Some dared not see the white flame of your star
Dimmed by the loathsome shadow of your Tsar.
But men who clung to sacred dreams could feel

Some day you would put forth your arm of steel
And drag the manikins from near and far,
Before the mighty people's judgement bar,
To answer for the ruined commonweal . . .

Down from their high, dishonored place you hurled
The cowed incompetent, corrupted few;
The blood-bathed flag of a new life unfurled,
Revealed your soul alike - to Slav and, Jew:

The eyes of the too-long submissive world,
Lifted in golden hope, are, turned to you.

Unlike poems that celebrate the "Revolution," from a contrived working-class enthusiasm, McKay chose to focus on the personal - the relations between Slav and Jew.⁶⁰ This was a very sensitive issue for radicals, as was the Negro problem and its relationship to the world struggle. This "new life," McKay surmises, which is unattainable through a "blood-bathed flag," is built on another fragile relationship. The "white flame" of communism - which rings of racial meaning and codes - is not the solution to Slavic-Jewish

⁵⁸ *Workers' Dreadnought*, February 28, 1920.

⁵⁹ A previous issue of *Workers' Dreadnought* carried McKay's "An International Money Crisis?" (February 14, 1920), in which he observed: "So, whilst we are working and waiting for our revolution, we will, sometimes amuse ourselves by watching the grim struggle between English Capitalism and American Plutocracy - the latter now mainly represented by the Rockefellers' combined mineral, manufacturing and banking interests, that are slowly swallowing the house of Morgan, which was Britain's go-between for the period of the War."

⁶⁰ McKay was sensitized to ethnic issues after he began writing on India, Ireland, Wales and other parts of the Commonwealth for the *Dreadnought*, and at the International Club he became acquainted with many disenfranchised Jews, Poles, and Russians.

harmony, the poet implies. No state can remedy "race." Still, some need to cling to any "sacred dreams"; have their eyes "turned to you." While the poem is hopeful, it is also cautionary, and McKay admitted to Cunard some time later while living in North Africa that communism is not "the salvation of man in the machine age."⁶¹

The image of the "tired worker" is a trademark of McKay's poetry, as we find in the tired feet of the "Harlem Dancer." But in "Song of the New Soldier and Worker," war and industry collide in a mad, symbiotic "dance," which has the same ironic twists as the earlier "Capitalist at Dinner."

We are tired, tired, tired – we are work-weary and war-weary;
What though the skies are soft-blue and the birds still sing
And the balmy air of day is like wine! Life is dreary
And the whole wide world is sick and suffering.

We are weary, weary, weary, sad and tired and no longer
Will we go on as before, glad to be the willing tools
Of the hard and heartless few, the favored and the stronger,
Who have strength to crush and kill, for we are fools.

We will calmly fold our arms sore from laboring, and aching,
We will not still feed and guard the hungry, hideous, huge machine
That yawns with ugly mouth, performs its grim task of life-breaking
Like a fat whore, coarse and brazen and obscene.

O, to pull the thing to pieces! O, to wreck it all and smash
With the power and the will that only holy hate can give;
Even though our broken bodies may be caught in the crash
Even so – that children yet unborn may live!⁶²

The "machine" must not be supported, particularly when it seduces with enticements of "newness" (a deceptiveness that is borne out in Locke's "New Negro," which

⁶¹ McKay to Cunard, October 15, 1932. Harry Ransom.

⁶² *Workers' Dreadnought*, April 1920. This poem was later put to music by Jack Flodin and titled "Be Patient, Weary Body: The Tired Worker." (In the Marian Anderson Collection of Music Manuscripts, Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania.)

McKay felt was mired in nationalistic and militarist interests). The “fat whore” is a reference to this collaboration, but it is also a criticism of those who “feed and guard” this hungry machine. Women, as a vanguard, had a particular responsibility to starve this insatiable war machine so that “Even though our broken bodies may be caught in the crash / Even so – that children yet unborn may live!”

BEFORE COMING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE CAMBRIDGE INTELLECTUALS and Ogden’s clean sense of poetic language, McKay’s esthetic world fit compactly into Jekyll’s upper-class English breeches and a romanticized view of the poet-peasant. McKay corroborated that perspective, in his masquerade as “a Jamaican peasant of pure-blood stock.”⁶³ To his credit, Walter Jekyll, avoided clichés of the primitive in vogue at the time (one can find them in, for instance, Vachel Lindsay’s *The Congo and Other Poems*, published in 1915, in which “Fat black bucks” beat on empty barrels with broom handles) and wrestled with the relationship of these two modes of Englishness, the acquired and natural

Likewise, Ogden re-oriented McKay’s “songs” – which the Cambridge linguist viewed as “symbolic melodies” from the colonies – toward a synthesis of English traditions that would challenge the Eurocentricism and nationalism of the day. Ogden’s re-orientation involved shifting the poet’s “acquired” American and colonial subjectivity, especially his identification with a racial Harlem. Jekyll had noted in 1912 that “What Italian is to Latin, that in regard to English is the negro variant thereof,” and explained

⁶³ *Songs of Jamaica*, p. 9.

that McKay expressed himself in “the vernacular of that island, a pretty variant of English.”⁴⁴ That, of course, mean the everyday speech of the peasants, the regional sounds and adaptations; he also meant it to be soul. As a trained minister, Jekyll’s quest of the vernacular was spiritual, and his book *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* would be the ecumenical follow-up to his *The Bible Untrustworthy*. That island expression had dual purposes for Ogden – it would help to “decolonize” the dominant ideology that espoused war and imperialism; and it would promote his ideas about language and propaganda. McKay’s “acquired” English would be the “feet of clay” that would carry these “monuments” throughout the world. A more sophisticated poet-peasant, who wrote on many levels *simultaneously* in a coded diasporic language, was welcomed into this brotherhood of peers – a generation of Cambridge radicals and intellectuals who were, unlike New Negroes in America, in revolt against *everything*. No mere decoder of Caribbean ephemerals (as he had been for Walter and Gertrude Jekyll), the native triumphantly proclaimed his new identity as synthesizer.

I have returned
 But you will never find,
 All the familiar things of me intact,
 I am like a classic that a modern mind
 Has cut and altered to improve the act.

Now many passions agitate my heart,
 For storms have swept the currents of my blood:
 The years between have done their cyclic part-
 The streams new courses found after the flood.

This mood that seems to you so passing strange,
 This that you wrongly call a cynic smile,

⁴⁴ An April 30, 1912 *Daily Gleaner* article quoted a review that appeared in the *Christian Commonwealth* on March 27, 1912, in which Jekyll was cited for his dialect work on Jamaica. Another review appeared in *Garden* (qtd. in *Daily Gleaner*, March 20, 1912, p. 14).

Is nothing but a sequence of sea-change –
I have been running round a little while.

Though you may think me tired-minded, blank,
With nought to show since when I wandered hence,
No outward token that I found and drank
Deep of the fountain of experience:

Yet I am richer now by many things,
Such treasures as I found along the way,
Those moments of my flight with golden wings,
Attached a monument to my feet of clay.⁶⁵

He also viewed his body as a site of esthetic struggle, which will become apparent in other poems. Here, the poet has fashioned himself as a free-agent internationalist Caliban who will bring cultural “riches” to the Motherland – the “soul” of his Jamaican jungle identity – from “treasures as I found along the way.” Still, even though Ogden’s research into language and diasporic cultures “brought a sparkling stream of fresh thought into stables which have for thousands of years very badly needed cleaning,” tensions with that imperial past endured – and played out in various political situations (“Some” 12). While it deepened his research in Basic English, the sparse and unadorned verses also pleased him esthetically: This hybrid sensibility worked within yet resisted (and, extraordinarily, reshaped) English literary conventions as well. It was a true revolutionary moment, and Ogden was delighted.

There are those who maintain that the present parlous plight of poetry in this country is due chiefly to the state into which criticism has fallen during the past few years. The recognised organs of literary comment, it is often said, have either

⁶⁵ Unpublished, “The Years Between” alludes to McKay’s early relationship to Empire and his new one upon entering England. It can also be read – and has – as the years between the first and second world wars, or the poet’s departure from and return to America. I, however, see it as re-establishing a literary tradition begun in colonial ethnography, horticulture, and dialect. “New Poems,” in the James Weldon Collection, the Beinecke Library. An abbreviated version appeared in *The Selected Poems of Claude McKay* as “I Shall Return,” and placed in the “Songs for Jamaica” section, giving the impression that the poem reflected a spiritual return to Jamaica.

lapsed or passed into the hands of cliques, and unless the aspiring poet has taken care to join one or another of the mutual admiration societies which set the standard, and whose own works are barely distinguishable either in form or content, he is not likely to get further in print than he can in MS.”⁶⁶

When *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* appeared months later, at least one journal, Ogden exclaimed, noted the linguistic significance of the writing, and “has done more than briefly indicate that a ‘nigger minstrel’ or an ‘overseas poet’ has issued some verses.” The reviewer was humbled:

It is an honour to our language—despite our racial shortcomings, it is a deserved honour – that it should have been chosen as a vehicle, by an African poet, for such a passionate exhortation to his own people.⁶⁷

Many believed that cultural change was long overdue and that “English was worn out” – on both sides of the Atlantic. Edmund Grosse, the London literary critic, for instance, wrote that in the future, poetry

will be largely written in languages which have been subjected to less wear and tear – languages which have not so extensive and complicated a literature and in which simple things can still be said without affectation and without repetition.

Such a comment, however, was sneered at by Max Eastman and other radicals at the *Masses* in the United States – whose American chauvinism prevented them from seeing the deeper significance.⁶⁸

Ogden worked at creating new international paradigms, politically and esthetically. Along with Mary Sargant Florence and her son Philip, Ogden attacked male privileging,

⁶⁶ *Cambridge Magazine* X (January-March 1921), p. 116-117.

⁶⁷ Westminster; qtd in *Cambridge Magazine*, p. 117.

⁶⁸ Quoted in *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911-1917*, p. 133-34. “We think it is not language, but Edmund Grosse and all the other literary poets who are worn out. . . . The poetry of England is wonderful, a treasure

and its insidious relationship to war, property, and the poverty of women. Florence was a seasoned veteran and had attended the 1907 Hague Women's Peace Conference. Together they produced a series of articles on "Militarism versus Feminism: An Enquiry and a Policy Demonstrating that Militarism Involves the Subjugation of Women," published anonymously by Allen and Unwin as *Militarism versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War* in April 1915, to convince women not to waver in their peace efforts. "In war man alone rules: when war is over man does not surrender his privileges."⁶⁹ Such views have been corroborated by later literary scholars, such as Jane Marcus.

The study of World War I and its effects on women in England begins with the acknowledgment that all wars destroy women's culture, returning women to the restricted roles of childbearing and nursing and only that work that helps the war effort. The struggle for women's own political equity becomes almost treasonous in wartime.⁷⁰

These radicals also wanted to counteract the support and publicity given by recent converts to the war effort, such as Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, and other traditional suffragists.⁷¹

Another collaborative project, which involved Richards and Ogden, had its beginnings in the most untheoretical place, and the idea for it – communication and the chauvinism of language – followed a riotous afternoon during which Ogden's bookshop and art gallery were ransacked by medical students celebrating the Armistice, which had just been on November 11, 1918. His place was a known center of feminism and anti-war

house, but those who live in that house will never add to its riches," commented Max Eastman, in January 1913.

⁶⁹ *Militarism versus Feminism*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ "Afterword," *Not So Quiet . . .*, by Helen Zenna Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1989), p. 249.

⁷¹ Ogden met Florence through her son Philip who was Ogden's colleague at Cambridge. (See *Militarism versus Feminism*, p. 21).

activity. Along with a grand piano, which was rolled through the plate-glass window of the shop, students, “flown with the spirits of the occasion, were smashing it up.” Richards, who had been renting a room from Ogden at Free School Lane, happened to be walking by at the time. “This looked, and was, rather dangerous,” recalled Richards, “but there was Ogden standing in the doorway calmly watching the assailants.” Later, around midnight, Ogden visited Richards and asked if he could identify the rioters. As they left for the police station, halfway down the “tightly twisting stairs, under an aged gas jet,” as Richards described it, Ogden made some remark upon a recent controversy in *Mind* that engaged the two for several hours (“Some” 11).

Somehow we stopped there and started talking about meaning. There had been an article in *Mind* and another play-up in, I think, the Aristotelian Society Proceedings; people had been talking about meaning and making an awful mess of it, and we’d been reading them by accident – neither of us knew the other was interested at all – and we started making comments on them. We stood there two hours on the stairway till one o’clock. I can remember a bats-wing gas burner above my head. This was out of kilter and every little while it squealed and I would reach up and try to adjust the tap of the burner. We went on and on, and the whole of our book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, was talked out clearly in two hours.⁷²

While the meeting inspired a long and fruitful relationship, the underlying motive was not forgotten. In fact, theory and praxis were remarkably interchangeable for Ogden, and years later Richards would comment fondly upon the activist scholar’s effect on him.

Along with Richards and James Wood, they conceived of Basic English as an “international auxiliary language” for “general communication, commerce, and science” (Basic is an acronym for “British, American, Scientific, Industrial and Commercial”). Ogden believed it was

⁷² I.A. Richards, *Complementarities: Uncollected Essays*. Ed. John Paul Russo. Harvard U P, 1976; Manchester, Eng.: Carcanet New Press, 1977.

the business of all internationally-minded persons to make Basic English part of the system of education in every country, so that there may be less chance of war, and less learning of languages – which, after all, for most of us, are a very unnecessary waste of time. (*System of Basic English* 10)

But, more importantly, this language that appealed to the internationally minded was a way to level the divide of difference – to make feelings and thoughts, without jargon and charged syntax, accessible to all. Ogden saw it as an entryway for “those whose natural language is not English.” Basic would be a “minimal” language, “capable of serving all purposes,” Richards recalled later (“Some” 12). Ogden was interested in McKay’s use of this “acquired” English, which up until now was simply a theoretical abstraction. McKay understood (he worked with Jekyll who also was interested in idiom and dialect). He explained that his English possessed a “melody of dialect,” and noted when his encountered with some West Indian soldiers at the Drury Club it gave him “a strange, pleasant sensation as of regaining some precious thing long lost.” Like James Joyce, Ogden saw this “symbolic melodies” as the connective tissue of a diaspora. This “panoptic” perspective, as he once characterized Basic English, was a buttress to the “old Word-Magic” of nationhood, war, and hypocrisy. He explained, in a preface to Joyce’s *Tales Told of Shem and Shaun: Three Fragments from Work in Progress*, that

If it is worth asking what can be done for Internationalism with the 500 words of Panoptic English, or whither a billion symbols will lead the groping scientist; it is equally worth creating new symbolic melodies on the eternal themes even for a dozen kindred experts in emotional association, with the entire paraphernalia of communicative language, from the discretest intra-verbal punctuation to the most saturated polysyllabic interpenetration. (viv-xv)

McKay explained the transformation of his own use of English in Jamaica and its alteration in the United States. "What I gained in America was more a polishing up and refinement of my own language," he pointed out, "chiefly by listening – reading too – and comparing the American idiom with ours." McKay was truly a natural speaker, who acquired and then altered the form – much like his poetic style. Ogden commented wryly, as the solution to world war,

What the world needs most is about 1,000 more dead languages – and one more alive⁷³

WHILE MCKAY'S POEMS WERE A PERFECT SPECIMEN FOR COLONIAL LINGUISTIC WORK, his English visit also evoked conflicted feelings about his identity and function in English society: was he to be an artist, a political go-between, or a translator of the exotic? One senses a hesitancy and embarrassment on revealing that other peasant identity to Ogden, hence his insistence on nondialect verse. In "Old England," which typified this peasant perspective brought to England (circa 1912), dislocated Island flavors, senses, and sights that had seduced and excited ethnographers and botanists, and allowed entry into Empire, were reminders of deep misreadings. McKay's poetic evolution, I believe reflects this esthetic dilemma. His image of "Old England" was associated with "deir solemn sacred

⁷³ McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready, *Debabelization*, p. 13; quoted in Holden, p. 80. In contrast, modernists, such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, viewed dialect as a way of renewing language, as part of "a program that would demolish the authority of European languages and even of the Roman alphabet." Dialect would "carry the social and cultural dislocations of the modern period . . . to their logical conclusion in a new language." (See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-century Literature*, p. 99.)

beauty to a weary searchin' heart." This visit to "de homeland England" in search of cultural "soul" is written, however, in the fractured dialect of a peasant. Once he has seen the "immortal Milton an' de wul-famous Shakespeare, Past'ral Wordswort', gentle Gray," the peasant-poet claims he will have, finally, "rest grad an' contented in me min' for evermore."⁷⁴ But such an encounter is a fiction in the colonial poet's mind – and is written in the mask of the outsider who has mastered the craft of writing to empire's vanity. One is reminded of Phillis Whealey's numerous poems on morality that directly speak to Puritan vanity – knowing that their Word has tamed the savage, and the savage, in turn, humbly expressing her gratitude. One misses the irony if Whealey's poems are read as mere corroborations with the dominant American ideology in the colonial era. For McKay, entry into the British Empire and that English "soul" was through horticulture. (Only recently, in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, has this portal been re-discovered, in those trans-Atlantic routes of flora and agriculture that had conditioned and shaped the enslaved and their descendants.) Thus, we see a diaspora that had less to do with pan-Africanism or formal communism than with terrain and synthesis (horticultural cross-breeding, would be one way of understanding the poet's esthetic. Ogden called it ideology of the environmental. There were, in addition, new routes of cultural transaction to master that involved primitivism, modernism, and linguistics. McKay's early training, however, was unshakable. Once, McKay patiently described a plant and its metaphoric use in "O.E.A," a love-song poem, shocked that Ogden, a cultured Englishman, should be so ignorant. Ogden, though intensely intellectual, clearly was a world apart from Walter or Gertrude Jekyll.

⁷⁴ "Old England," *The Dialect Poetry of Claude McKay*, Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972; p.63-65; originally, *Songs of Jamaica*, 1912.

It is eucharis. I thought you had it in Europe. It is a plant allied with the lily family. In some parts we call it kisses, in others, Easter Lily, if I remember rightly.

McKay's horticultural "apprenticeship" with Jekyll was built upon McKay's own native knowledge of Island plants (which helped him obtain scholarship to Kansas State College in the United States). It also was a route to having his work published, and more importantly, read in England. But those quaint avenues of horticulture and Fabian socialism (which conjure mid-afternoon English teas and jubilees) that he skillfully navigated as an early twentieth-century Equiano were now elided by high modernism and internationalism communism.⁷⁵ The vernacular garden was in disarray, and McKay's new route into empire was internationalist, involving a feminist perspective and a new language. These "New Forces" were

In every place, however high, they lurk,
In the great buildings where the pale youths clerk,
In ships and in treasured pits of earth,
They stir the depths of men and come to birth.
I feel their mighty presence flaming near,
Oh, hark, my soul! Their voices everywhere.⁷⁶

This "mighty presence" presses against buildings and office cubicles; in great cities and in the hulls of ships and depths of gold mines. One is reminded of *Bartleby's* immovable revolt against the uniformity of business – and McKay hopes for a revolt of the educated working masses as well. "Pale youths" are this new vanguard – neither white nor black.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ McKay to Ogden, Mar 12, 1920. William Ready. Accompanied by Jekyll, he probably frequented the famous Royal Botanic Garden, in Hope, Jamaica (so inspiring that he named his daughter after the town in which the garden resided, and used it frequently as a pseudonym). A note from Una Marson to Carl Cowl, McKay's literary representative, on April 15, 1969, commented on the still-breathtaking variety of plant life at the Garden. "No wonder Claude had to write about the mountains and the flowers." Carl Cowl Archive. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

⁷⁶ *The Liberator*, July 1922.

⁷⁷ The poem "New Forces" appeared two months before Claude McKay spoke at the Fourth Congress of the Third International, in the Fall of 1922, on the importance of a vanguard composed of workers from the

Claude McKay was utterly changed by his English apprenticeship with Ogden, who helped to update the poet's literary atlas. There were contemporary art shows and literary events, lectures by Heretics and plays by Shaw, Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett, who they both admired.⁷⁸ McKay met one of the most restless and open minds on the British Isles, who was as gracious in helping the poet to navigate the precipices of race, literary worth, and identity as he had been in mentoring middle-class Cambridge youth. McKay worked at shaking off the image of a black dialect poem, while Ogden chipped away at the militarist language of a radical black poet. As an internationalist, Ogden was keenly aware of the poet's need to universalize his feelings. "One can't express any deep thought to perfection in it," complained McKay, on the use of dialect in poetry, "nor can it effectively bring forth the note of sorrow."⁷⁹ Dialect was hackneyed, observed McKay. "I've buried it and don't care to revive it again even though I have lost a certain amount of freedom and carelessness of speech in throwing it out. Maybe later I shall return to it."

In this new language of Ogden's panoptic, poems such as "Flowers of Passion" revisit the political-racial dance floor, but in England the texture of those boundaries become eroticized, used as a backdrop for the poet's Romanticized desires, passions, and memories in the aftermath – a type of cultural massacre, one wonders – to the performance:

The dancers have departed, dear,
And the last song has been sung;

industrialized and colonized countries. In contrast to the malaise that had been sweeping the world after WWI, this poem provided an optimism that challenged the dystopic *Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot. Both poetic works debuted that year, and revolutionary "forces" (and reactionary fears) were on the minds of everyone. Eliot, for instance, saw "commercial vulgarization" advancing "with great industry," and feared the "degeneration" of culture (*Vanity Fair*, November 23, 1923, p. 44.) McKay, in contrast, saw new cultural forces in "awakened workers." ("Socialism and the Negro," *Dreadnought*, January 31, 1920, p. 1-2.)

⁷⁸ "Up To Date," p. 3. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

⁷⁹ McKay to Ogden, May 12, 1920. William Ready.

The red-stained glasses mock my gaze.
And the fiddle lies unstrung.

And I'm alone, alone once more,
Save for your sweet brown face
That comes reproachfully to me
In this unholy place.

I've kissed a thousand flowers, my own,
Gone drunk with their perfume;
But found out, when the madness passed,
You were the one pure bloom.

I've come to realize at last
How awful it may be
To cut adrift from sacred ties
And be completely free.

But life grows many flowers, my love,
Within its garden wall,
And Passion's are the strangest
And the deadliest of all.

The poem (never published in America) is a ballad about abandoning love (Jamaica/England) for Harlem passion. It can also be read as McKay's abandonment of Walter Jekyll's idyllic embrace, the "one pure bloom." In England, McKay was alone "once more," adrift and cut off from the sacred ties of Jekyll's paternal-homoerotic patronage, which intensified his loneliness. McKay's *desires* to be part of literary England may indeed be the "deadliest" and "strangest of all," ones that the exiled Jekyll knew would ruin him.⁸⁰ The poet's gaze is mocked, and the "flowers" of his youth are incongruous in this "unholy" place. (The dance floor, which is called an "unholy place," is quite different from Harlem's self-conscious "shadows." Like "La Paloma in London," written at the same time, evokes

⁸⁰ "[W]hen I went away to America, I studied poetry to become modern and began writing sonnets and blank verse," McKay told Ogden. But Jekyll thought that he was "spoiling" himself, believing he could be a better writer without formal training. McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready.

homoerotic desires.) Is it *modernity* that the dance floor holds or threatens? A “sweet brown” maiden, who the poet was able to excise from his previous verse, reappears as a wraith – a reminder of the flower of his youth. Is “she” the source of the poet’s androgynous desires? McKay realizes the *superficiality* of his own perfume, whose aroma has been singed by Ogden’s literary formalism. The poem conveys McKay’s ambivalence toward this one “pure bloom” – of a Jekyll “natural” esthetic. He rejects all “sacred ties” in favor of passion’s deadliest and strangest blooms, which he perceived as modernism.

McKay’s view of the modern coincided with Ogden’s. In their frequent tours of London galleries to view “Negro sculpture” in Chelsea or the British Museum, they discussed boundaries of the modern and primitive esthetic. Ogden suggested seeing the current Cézanne exhibit, and wanted the colonial’s reaction. Artist and critic Roger Fry, who coined post-impressionism, first introduced Cézanne in 1910 (and again in 1912), shocking London and causing his friend Virginia Woolf to remark that it had changed human nature. McKay wasn’t so impressed, and it is interesting to imagine him at the same galleries and concerts that the Bloomsbury elite and Cambridge intellectuals had frequented. James Wood, an Ogden collaborator who wrote on modern art for *Cambridge Magazine*, had lengthy discussions with McKay during the time he lived in England, and some of his views of art are quite similar to McKay’s hybridizing poetic perspective. Wood, in a review, noted how “a new quality is recognized” in perceiving modern art – “or an old one in guise,” and is consolidated and synthesized, much as McKay re-imagined Jamaica on seeing some of the Cézanne pieces. “There is not an artificial mentality to be created – it is to the same beauty-loving faculty that appeal is made but from a new quarter.”

The modern painter therefore prefers to employ synthetic suggestion rather than the didactic method, and by constructing on his paper the main elements by which an emotional state is generated causes the details of outline, of tone, and of colour to appear according to variations in the imaginative activity and artistic personality of the beholder. He thus endows the subject with life, bringing the onlooker into direct personal contact with that for which he is searching, and he works for the most part not through likenesses or elevations to scale, but through complicated patterns and rhythms, the fine balance of tones, the contrast of dark against light, and colour blended like sounds in music not copied or matched from nature.

For Wood, art requires no struggle, and if one does she is pushing at a door that “opens inward.”⁸¹ This contradicted modern art critics such as Roger Fry and others who stressed the importance of analyzing the formal qualities within a work of art. This dynamic, in which viewer, reader, and artist are equally transformed, was also true for McKay’s esthetic. “I liked the atmosphere of the picture, the forest blue and the golden green of the banks as though the sun were shining through the leaves,” the poet noted of one of Cézanne’s landscapes. But McKay point of reference was Jamaica.⁸² He knew, however, that his descriptions lacked the English imprimatur, and requested: “When you can afford me a little time I should be so glad to do the picture galleries. I really want to appreciate and discriminate between good and bad art.”⁸³ Ogden enjoyed chaperoning McKay around London to art openings and galleries (Cézanne *was* admired by both) as if McKay, himself, was the art piece. They both liked opera and one performance in particular McKay compared to a free concert at Smith Place on City Road days later. The soloist, “one Miss Winnifred Lawson, had a beautiful voice,” he commented. “She sang two lyrics from *The Magic Flute*, which were “much better than the girl at the opera.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ James Wood, “The Hideousness of Modern Art,” *Cambridge Magazine* (Summer 1920), p. 13.

⁸² McKay to Ogden, April 30, 1920. William Ready.

⁸³ McKay to Ogden, April 2, 1920. William Ready.

⁸⁴ McKay to Ogden, May 18, 1920. William Ready.

The Syncopated Orchestra was the current rage at the Coliseum, and Ogden used the occasion to make what he thought was a broad complimentary connection with African works - a connection that was used to introduce readers to McKay's poem. In his June introduction, Ogden wrote that he found the same "peculiar qualities" in McKay's poems also in the rhythms of orchestra, "which we are becoming accustomed to look at as the distinctive contribution of African Art in general."⁸⁵ J.L.J.F.E Ezerman, the Dutch bibliophile who had taken a liking to McKay's poems and was responsible for his trip to England, felt that Ogden (Ezerman was considerably older) generalized.⁸⁶ He wrote to McKay on June 18 after he received the issue with the *Cambridge* poems: "The comparison of your work with the renderings of the Syncopated Orchestra seems rather far-fetched to me. What struck me most, when I heard them, was their tremendous rhythmic development. The quality of that rhythm is quite different than that of your poems."

McKay explained to Ogden that Ezerman heard the performance in *ragtime*, which gave it a totally modern feel. "However, he isn't altogether wrong about the orchestra," McKay added. "Listen to the Lambs' was the nearest thing to any of the old sorrow songs."

⁸⁵ *Cambridge Magazine* (June 1920), p. 55.

⁸⁶ McKay did not arrive in England in the fall of 1919 directly from New York, as he intimated to Ogden. At Ezerman's request, poet and patron first traveled to The Hague. Ezerman had hired McKay "to do research work on the Negro at the New York Public Library," which for the struggling artist was a "happy change from the factory life." The trip to Holland concerned Ezerman's relative who was gravely ill. Ezerman suggested McKay take along his poems, who also "arranged and typed them." Ezerman wanted to see the book into print, and urged McKay to travel to England with him. McKay looked for a publisher, while Ezerman resumed his research on "The Negro" at the British Museum. Ezerman paid for McKay's trip to England and his return to America. In gratitude, McKay dedicated the title poem of his chapbook, *Spring in New Hampshire*, to his Dutch patron. McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready. But McKay neglected to mention this important relationship in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*. McKay wrote that the Grays, a rather nice English couple who he met through Walter Jekyll, had come to his financial rescue and made the arrangements for his trip to England. McKay ended the entry in *A Long Way from Home* enigmatically, commenting that the Grays went off to Spain while he went off to England. (*A Long Way From Home*, Harcourt Brace, 1970; p. 4244.)

But McKay found the performance, in general, without balance. "Buddy and his drum was more than noisy and practically drowned out of whole band."⁸⁷ McKay was irritated more by the inability of these two white patrons to discern rhythmical balance. As for Ogden stereotyping McKay, Ezerman remarked, "it seems dangerous and unfair to you, to judge your work on the strength of the fact that you are a Negro. But perhaps it is the best way to get known."⁸⁸ McKay consoled Ogden's bruised ego.

I think he entirely misses what you are trying to show, that there is a universal community of art and culture. And if his environment and the influence of others can so easily be traced in an artist's work I think that in a much deeper sense the temperament or higher thought of his race may be found therein.⁸⁹

McKay was essential to the success of the Cambridge revolt. Ogden saw McKay's potential as early as March when he first received the first bundle of poems. "It seemed obvious to us," Ogden remarked on reflection,

that here was no ordinary set of verses. From an academic point of view, the emergence of a remarkable personality, the first of his race to express himself in such a medium might alone have secured attention. Are we not ethnologists? Do we not send expeditions to strange parts to hunt for the dusky, bosky art-products of Hoo-Doo and Voodoo? Are there not literary critics in universities who maintain that without a knowledge of the classics our noble English language cannot be writ? Have we not Schools of English to show that three years on top of ten are necessary for the acquisition of a style? Yet here was the mountain come to Mahomet, a Daniel come to the lion's den for judgment.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ McKay to Ogden, Saturday. William Ready.

⁸⁸ Ezerman to McKay, June 18, 1920. William Ready.

⁸⁹ McKay to Ogden, Saturday. William Ready.

⁹⁰ *Cambridge Magazine*, January-March 1921, p.117.

The British Museum was a favorite rendezvous, and McKay used those meetings to complete the work on "The Negro" that Ezerman and he began in New York.⁹¹ The two took in African exhibits, admiring the primitive masks (which fascinated Ogden, since he used them as masquerades at social events at his Soho home or Cambridge loft) and Benin sculptures, which were popular in New York, London and especially Paris. "I've been looking at the girl's head you spoke about. I suppose it is that [one] with the elaborate horn-like headdress. It is great, indeed, the cheeks, chin, and forehead are exquisite." Ogden frequently asked McKay's opinions, even though he was neither African nor tribal, and was pleasantly surprised by the thoughtful responses. "I don't see anything lacking at all from the European view-point," he explained to Ogden on seeing some reproduction that the editor liked, "for me it's quite in the Greek tradition." Another image, a print of a Congo woman's head in the shape of a vessel (reproduced in *Cambridge Magazine*), he found "altogether different with the other things, those I saw in Chelsea and at the museum." McKay was a patient teacher to Ogden's fantasies of primitive African art – based on misguided scholarship. And Ogden, the insatiable scholar, sought to change such views. McKay explained the connection for the colonial, cut off from the mother lode:

They make me think of medicine gods and charms to frighten evil spirits. In the islands among the natives it is the reptile world that the obeahmen use to inspire fear in their clients – snakes, frogs, lizards, etc. We have a weird superstition about the salamander which I will tell you of sometime. Naturally in nearly all Negroes, at least the West Indians, where there is no real fear there is a great aversion to reptiles. And I sense the atmosphere of fear in the images. Indeed, the limbs make

⁹¹ Although the massive undertaking was never published, Ezerman did complete a 70-page alphabetical list of Chinese and Japanese emperors, including mikados and shoguns of Japan, which was published in 1893. McKay's patrons, unlike those of the Harlem variety, were clearly offbeat, but brilliant. In 1915 W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Negro*.

me think of reptiles. There is no repose, grace or dignity in them. They are disturbing. I shouldn't care to live among them."⁹²

One doesn't know if McKay disproved of the images, the reptiles, or the natives. In any case, the poet shattered any idyllic notion that Ogden might harbor. Another time, as he a competitor was vying for his affections (putting Ogden in the female role), he wrote of a disappointing afternoon, accompanied by "a woman who had lived in Egypt." He found her "stupid and dull," and wrote Ogden wistfully, "I should have liked so much to be in the Egyptian room with you."⁹³

McKay seemed to dominate their encounters, and he flourished in his role as colonial teacher. He was patient in separating misperceptions from realities, particularly with regard to notions of race and empire. Ogden reciprocated in much the same spirit, helping McKay in his quest for poetic honesty. McKay saw in Ogden's character something that defied social or racial boundaries – and admired such a stance, which was familiar to him. The two played at society's masquerade, and knew from the real thing. Yet through their masquerades and critiques, they were able to sustain their principles as modernist intellectuals.

Essentially, McKay was a tour guide, offering Ogden a diasporic adventure with his artist friends and fringe characters. It was this role of go-between that he used throughout his life, in some cases as a political and sexual hustler. He invited Ogden to the International Club, where there was an exhibit of Bolshevik prints and photographs. The

⁹² McKay to Ogden, May 18, 1920. William Ready. McKay's later novel, *Banana Bottom*, includes comments on this infatuation with primitive art, and Ogden may have been the inspiration, particularly since McKay viewed his opinion as representative of the art establishment.

⁹³ McKay to Ogden, April 2, 1920. William Ready.

bulk of the stuff, he complained, was either socialistic propaganda or patriotic things, but McKay thought that Ogden would like the photographers whose work resembled some that appeared in the magazine. "I was telling a young acquaintance, an anarchist idealist, of the different way in which you talked about art and he is wondering whether he might see you sometime," McKay enticed Ogden, of one political artist. Another time he was more suggestive: "I gave Bernard your address." "Bernard" was McKay's companion to the Cezanne exhibit. McKay masqueraded as the naif:

I couldn't get my friend's conception of it. He was preoccupied with the women's bodies and the flesh tints, which I also admired for the softness and harmony with the whole. But Bernard was looking at it from a sex viewpoint. At present he is obsessed with sex.

In another confidential moment, McKay remarked that he was embarrassed by a young Trinidadian mulatto "who got into trouble with some of the working men and their women."⁹⁴ In these unstated homosexual gaps, McKay knew that Ogden found the youthful, though dangerous, fringe exciting too. A place where the sexual (and strange) met the political. McKay explained how one comrade, "a North of England youth" who "existed by blackmailing the furtive gentlemen who haunted Hyde Park" out of "hatred of the social system."⁹⁵ The hustler was a committed communist, and McKay implied that political and sexual deviancies merged temperamentally.

But McKay also provoked Ogden's interests in the black-white patronage system, so popular in Harlem. In another letter, McKay complained of his patron being "quite

⁹⁴ McKay to Ogden, April 30, 1920. William Ready.

⁹⁵ "Up To Date," p. 4. Harry Ransom.

mercenary"; esthetically, he had to be approached "from his own standpoint."⁹⁶ Ezerman, for instance, scolded McKay for not including the "double sex sonnets" in the magazine. When he told Ezerman that Ogden suggested they be cut, he nearly pulled his financing of the book.⁹⁷ Ezerman was a musician and a lover of art, much like Ogden. He was, however, of an older generation. Unlike Jekyll's control, a less impressionable McKay saw the gaps in Ezerman's ways.

I couldn't work in close harmony with him. He would be nice, but possessed little tricks of manner, more pronounced in his own country, which exasperated me.⁹⁸

Ogden was taken in confidence. McKay explained that Ezerman was "of the old traditional school," and stirred Ogden's sexual anxieties again, several months later, when he portrayed his odd Dutchman as "a powerfully sexed person who is ashamed of his passion" - a cloaked reference to Ogden's own closeted homosexuality.⁹⁹ Ezerman had "sentimental ideas about that sort of stuff," McKay noted, playfully - "although now he is trying to shake off some of the dust."¹⁰⁰ Ogden seemed to agree with that estimation, at least in regard to poetics. Ogden reminded McKay that his patron had "plenty of feeling but no fine discriminating taste."¹⁰¹

Their social interactions were sketched by McKay in the poem "La Paloma in London," the cafes and nights around Soho where McKay spent evenings with his assorted friends near Ogden's flat. "La Paloma in London" is a work that exemplifies McKay's newly

⁹⁶ McKay to Ogden, April 4, 1920. William Ready.

⁹⁷ After McKay sent Ezerman a copy of *Cambridge Magazine* in which his poems appeared, McKay wrote to Ogden that his patron was "displeased for our leaving out the socialist stuff and now wants to back out. I am not going to let him if I can." McKay to Ogden, August 17, 1920. William Ready.

⁹⁸ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready.

⁹⁹ McKay to Ogden, October 9, 1920. William Ready.

¹⁰⁰ McKay to Ogden, June 23, 1920. William Ready.

acquired skills in navigating the geographies of diaspora. "La Paloma," Spanish for carrier pigeon, is deployed by as a lyrical "stop" – it is also a trope for this diasporic memory, which intrudes on the English revelers. The hard, androgynous press of a Harlem dance floor conjures the soft love-image of a Cuban woman – all of which is choreographed by the "low guitar" of La Paloma.

About Soho we went before the light;
We went, unresting six, craving new fun,
New Scenes, new raptures for the fevered night
Of rollicking laughter, drink and song, was done.
The vault was void, but the dawn's great star
That shed upon our path its silver flame,

McKay sent Ogden the poem, hoping he would like it – or at least arouse his sexual appetite. "I prefer it to any of the lot," he admitted, and asked his mentor's opinion about the use of the word "vault" for sky. Can you omit "above" and still maintain "good English"? But Ogden wasn't keen on the verse, and probably recoiled at the imitative borrowings from modernists, such as T.S. Eliot, who was also writing at this time of "la palomas" appearing suddenly out of darkened casements. The poem ends

When La Paloma on a low guitar
abruptly from a darkened casement came. –
Harlem! All else a blank, I saw the hall,
And you in your red shoulder sash come dancing
With Val, against me careless by the wall,
Your burning coffee-colored eyes keen glancing
Aslant at mine, proud in your golden glory!
I loved you, Cuban girl, fond sweet Diory.

One wonders if La Paloma is, indeed, Ogden, abruptly emerging from the "darkened casement" as the poet's new artistic light. The fate of the poem shows Ogden's own prejudices and fears, of not wanting to reveal too much of the personal, of retreating to the

¹⁰¹ McKay to Ogden, Saturday, June 1920. William Ready.

masquerade of the African and exotic, and we see this in his attempts at excising the Negro out of Harlem and Soho.¹⁰² Such fears became increasingly problematic (for McKay, in expressing race), as he juggled the desires and financial backing of his Holland patron.

Ogden wanted the selections to be fresh and original, and to avoid those “racial things,” as McKay affectionately called them, of “Black Fiend,” “White Fiends,” “Pariahs,” and “If We Must Die” that made his reputation in American magazines such as *Liberator* and *Pearson's Magazine*. McKay admitted that they “were thrown off at white heat,” and suggested “Exhortation” and “Rest in Peace” as substitutes. But Ogden raised other objections, about the “militancy” of the language. “You’re right to put [“Exhortation”] in the propaganda group,” noted McKay

but don't you think it has more of poetry than any? When I wrote it I felt
the march of the rhythm like martial music and I still have the same
feeling in thinking about it. For me it overshadows all the rest.

McKay however saw them as a grouping that was racially and temperamentally balanced. “From purely racial motives,” McKay wrote, “I shouldn’t like to publish the two you have chosen without the others. You would understand why if you had lived in America and tasted the poison of hatred.” American “coloured opinion” won’t relish it, he said. “Pariahs,” on the other hand, had “the note of despair” that was offset by “If We Must Die.”¹⁰³ McKay sent another batch, more recent:

six love songs towards the end have been written since Christmas. The
others are of the period of the war, some before. I wanted to send about

¹⁰² McKay to Ogden, April 14, 1920. William Ready. Possibly too biographical or revealing, “La Paloma in London” was omitted from *Spring in New Hampshire*. The poem finally appeared in the January 1922 issue of the *Liberator*.

¹⁰³ McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready.

10 but I couldn't decide on which should go so I finally agreed on the lot as you might pick out the better ones."¹⁰⁴

McKay eventually agreed with Ogden that the poems were "propaganda" and should be omitted, but was nevertheless sentimental. "I have been comparing those that you've passed and those that you've failed, and I see clearly where many of the latter are far below the average standard." McKay was beginning to question his own perceptions regarding esthetics and race, particularly about things he thought he understood. Increasingly, it was difficult to answer Ezerman when he demanded: "Did you yourself choose these or was it the Editor?"

He was touched by Ogden's concern for detail and craft in writing, but puzzled by the linguist's selections. "Perhaps I was unable to make you feel that I really wanted the bad stuff eliminated rather than sandwiched between the good. But I am sincere about it."¹⁰⁵ Still, the poet was unwilling, at times, to see Ogden's broad strokes. He viewed his verse as oral, a perspective he acquired from Jekyll who had put his verse to music. He had sung his early poems to passers-by in Jamaica, according to one account.¹⁰⁶ Did Ogden think that the poems were "echoes of other singers"? McKay asked. "I am sending them back," the poet replied tersely, "with the hope that you might think a little better of them." Of course the "echoes of other singers" – the orality and folk texture of a poem – is something very much desired in black writing today. For Ogden, however, those echoes competed with his system of simplified English.

¹⁰⁴ McKay to Ogden, March 7, 1920. William Ready.

¹⁰⁵ McKay to Ogden, March 7, 1920. William Ready.

¹⁰⁶ Kathryn Lindberg, "Rebels to the Right/Revolution to the Left: Ezra Pound and Claude McKay in 'The Syndicalist Year' of 1912," *Ezra Pound and African-American Modernism* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2001).

McKay was curious about Jekyll's family and friends from his colonial days, such as Sydney Olivier, the Jamaican governor who praised his dialect poems. He especially wanted to thank Agnes, Walter Jekyll's sister in law, and others who helped promote his Island verse among the garden set in England. He remembered fondly that "Lady Herbert," as he referred to her, had sent him warm underwear as protection against the cold of America when he went off to college. It was another of those English traditions that shaped his view of the upper classes. He was also obligated to pay Lord Olivier a visit too, since his daughter helped with a British Museum permit, which the poet desperately needed to finish his research for *Ezerman*. Without a permit, there would be no book.

McKay admitted to being a "shy of troubling" Olivier due to the incident in Jamaica in 1912 that involved an embarrassing McKay poem on "De Gubnor's Salary." But McKay seemed just as eager to "surprise" his "old Master" as Olaudah Equiano, the eighteenth-century navigator, was. They did meet several times to reminisce about Jamaica, and Olivier's daughter did obtain a British Museum permit for McKay. But when McKay sent an inscribed copy of *Spring in New Hampshire*, the ex-governor never replied.¹⁰⁷ To give Olivier the benefit of doubt, he may have replied and McKay never received the letter, since he moved frequently because of his political work at the *Dreadnought*.

On the other hand, he thought an intrusion upon the Jekyll's would be a disaster. Even though they always reminded him that he would be welcomed in England. But he now had reservations. Much had changed in those years "between."

¹⁰⁷ McKay to Ogden, March 26, 1920. William Ready.

When I asked about Mrs. McKenna I learned that her husband was a big bank director. That just froze me, for I came here under such peculiar conditions. I thought that if I tried to see them they would think I was presuming on them because of their relative's interest in me.

Would they still welcome with open arms the native who impressed them with folkloric wisdom now that he was a Bolshevik poet? ¹⁰⁸

MCKAY WAS HARDLY THE SHUFFLING COLONIAL WHO STUMBLED onto the literary world of Cambridge and London, fortuitously by the depth of his racial complexion (the English, one must be reminded, were hardly proponents of entitlements). He had come trained as a lyric poet in the Romantic tradition, cutting his teeth in America become seeking advice and mentoring in English ways and traditions. Over the summer of 1920, as the *Cambridge* issue took shape, McKay became propriety about his poems, which would reach a new readership of intellectuals. No longer did he feel compelled to explain "group identity" or native oddities. Now he was his own poet, and became concerned with fine points and esthetics. "About the introductory note," McKay asked, "don't you think if you write acquired it might mislead people into thinking that I was Spanish or French-speaking West Indian, whereas if you could mention dialect or native version of English where you have 'publishing 2 volumes' it might set them right?" Ogden did see the poet's point. For him, McKay represented an example of Basic English theory. Meeting McKay, the mission became self-fulfilling, "a programme of linguistic simplification," as he called it, between the colonized and colonizer, the revolutionary goal, to "increase the ease and accuracy of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

communication” in these intellectual’s reach to the colonies. McKay’s esthetic (as Ogden had said of African art) would make a “distinctive contribution” to this cultural transaction. “The fact that this is for Mr. McKay partly an acquired language adds considerably to the interest of his work.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Richards in his preface to *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* noted McKay’s ability to absorb “modern literary English.”

though we have recently been made aware of the more remarkable achievements of African Art typified by the sculpture from Benin and the music by the ‘Spirituals,’ this is the first instance of success in poetry with which we in Europe at any rate have been brought into contact. The reasons for this late development are not far to seek, and the difficulties presented by modern literary English as an acquired medium would be sufficient to account for the lacuna; but the poem here selected may, in the opinion of not a few who have seen them in periodical form, claim a place beside the best work that the present generation is producing in this country.

Of course the reference to “the present generation” was a rebuff to those reactionary writers, such as Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot, who were deriding the mongrelization of the white race. There is, however, a hint that Ogden performed one of his ingenious impersonations, assuming the persona of a literary critic, his friend I.A. Richards. It has the feel of Ogden, and behind Ogden, McKay.¹¹⁰ That may explain the preface’s tenuous authority within the modernist English canon. Ogden and Richards were known collaborators, and that fact complicated and challenged literary authority. McKay, however, was pleased with the final wording of the preface. “I cannot think of a [more] successful literary man,” complimented McKay, “conscious that he was introducing an unknown

¹⁰⁹ “Introduction,” *Cambridge Magazine* (Summer 1920).

¹¹⁰ At first, McKay preferred to have Bernard Shaw, whose work he admired, write a few words, or “a cultured man who is a good judge of fine things.” And at one point McKay suggested that Ogden do the introduction himself. In “A Black Briton Comes ‘Home’: Claude McKay in England, 1920,” Wayne Cooper and Robert C. Reinders claim that Shaw declined the offer when he was approached by Ogden. *Race* IX: 1 (Julv 1967), p. 76. But there is no indication of this in McKay’s letters. McKay actually sent Ogden a “draft of the sort of introduction I should like for the book,” and suggested: “If you don’t mind my saying it, I don’t

writer, in just the way Richards has written.”¹¹¹ Richards expressed his approval of the poems, and offered a few changes in the rhyme.¹¹² Ogden, through Richards and McKay, sought to link the village with the metropolis, the colonies to Empire.

Likewise, the summer issue of *Cambridge Magazine* would be Ogden's revolt against the old order – the “intransigent gerontocracy” as he described it. McKay's poems would be a universal call to arms, in which the colonial writes back – and writes back well.¹¹³ “Our present contents speak for themselves,” Ogden noted. There was a collaboration with Richards on “The Symbolist Movement” and “What Is a Fact” by Ogden under the pseudonym Adelyne More, an essay by James Wood on “The Hideousness of Modern Art,” an antimilitarist diatribe by E.M. Forster titled “Hymn before Action” (though he later volunteered as a nurse during WWI) and a feminist manifesto against the prevailing “separate but equal” notion of education by Eileen Power. Ogden was quite excited by including a representative of the colonial perspective.

while the average age of writers here represented is well under 30, the Writing on the Wall has removed the necessity of any further local barrage against those particular forms of gnarled necrophily which have regarded the academic universe as an eternal preserve of intransigent gerontocracy, and leaves us free to make a direct and more positive appeal to less testudinal temperaments. In this way, with the hope that some of the seed may fall on good ground, we may best get what fun there is to be got out of life; and there will be much less fuss than of yore, for we shall not have

see why you cannot sign it – with your degree as ‘Ed. of the C.M.’” McKay to Ogden, June 19, 1920. William Ready.

¹¹¹ Ogden convinced McKay that Shaw would be a poor choice for the introduction, a fact the poet doesn't reveal in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*, simply noting that Shaw declined. He wrote Ogden: “Now I come to think that an introduction by Shaw or any well-known man would have spoiled the effect – too loud for such a little thing,” commented the poet. McKay to Ogden, October 9, 1920. William Ready.

¹¹² “I like this very much,” Richards wrote Ogden. “I've made a few notes of stops and of places when my ear asks for some change of rhythm.” Richards to Ogden. William Ready.

¹¹³ Originally McKay wanted his poems titled “Tropics in New York,” which was antithetical to Ogden's attempts at universalizing McKay's esthetic. McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready.

to start more shops or call on the law of the land to see to it that the old men do not do us in. ¹¹⁴

McKay was pleased to be included in the Cambridge circle, among "the most brilliant and energetic minds in the British Isles." ¹¹⁵

Ogden understood the challenges this new sensibility posed to high modernism's link to Empire. As an internationalist committed to undoing militarism's firm hold on European politics, he also sought to distance modernism from popular artistic expression. For McKay, Ogden was a forceful English opponent to the reactionary high modernism of T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis that was sweeping America and Europe, a trend that revolted both. McKay remarked, on returning to America in January 1921, that

Over here they have the craziest and most confused ideas about men like Roger Fry, Nevinson, and Wyndham Lewis and others who are able propagandists. It would be such fun if you or Wood or both together would put them in their places and mention the few that are really accomplishing something in England and whether any are under the influence of your beloved Cézanne. ¹¹⁶

Fry, who once celebrated Cézanne, was now closing ranks with the dominant ideology, McKay implied. Ogden, as a cultural relativist, had a brilliant sweep of his vision. He was able to easily connect McKay's "bent" English to Joyce's "Mackenzie dialect." His description of the Irish novelist as "the bell-wether of debabelization" or the "promised liquidator" of "the machinery of literature" - "clogged by the ministrations and minutiae of an ossified propaedeutic" - would aptly apply to the colonial poet's diasporic experiments (Ogden, *Tales* ix). Ogden's impartiality was also seen in his collaborations with

¹¹⁴ *Cambridge Magazine* X (June 1920), p. 1.

¹¹⁵ "Up To Date," p. 1. Harry Ransom.

¹¹⁶ McKay to Ogden, 1922. William Ready.

and support of women intellectuals. Ogden's feelings about literary obtuseness, which related to his opinions on high modernism, are revealed in *Debabelization*:

In order to keep the English as they are, with their ideas preserved, it is necessary to keep them from learning of language which they would speak in common.¹¹⁷

McKay appealed to progressives like Ogden, Richards, and Sylvia Pankhurst precisely because of his ontological – and orthological – position to Empire. For Ogden, it had less to do with dialect than a curiosity about this language of expatriation. “Time is on our side,” McKay wrote to Ogden on February 25, 1920, alluding to internationalism's larger aims. “Perhaps ten years hence the white peoples will realize what the war has done to this civilization. When I read of Churchill, Noske, and Foch still trying to raise great armies I can only smile bitterly and wonder if the European nations are determined to destroy the little that is left of them.”¹¹⁸

On October 9, 1920, as he neared the end of this apprenticeship in England, McKay wrote Ogden that he was unable to deal with Sylvia Pankhurst's “erratic nature” any longer. The newspaper was experiencing all sorts of “domestic and business difficulties,” and “all the routine work of getting out her paper falls upon me in consequence.” It was time for McKay to leave. Even if McKay wanted to stay – which was unlikely since money and time were running out (once his book appeared, which would be any day, his patron

¹¹⁷ *Debabelization*, p. 147; qtd. in Holden, p. 81.

¹¹⁸ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Readv. Gustav Noske was commander of the German armed forces during the war. In January 1919, however, with the end of the war, he ordered the suppression of all radicals when domestic unrest erupted. A second popular uprising, instigated by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, against the imperial regime was brutally put down, and the two leaders summarily executed. French general Ferdinand Foch was president of the Allied Military Committee at Versailles in 1920, and the commander of Allied forces during the war. In the second battle of Marne in August 1914,

in Holland would no longer finance his stay in England), politically, he was at an impasse. He wrote Ogden that he was "cutting myself loose: from the *Dreadnought* circle. Now that his literary mission was accomplished, there was "nothing to be gained by keeping in with them."¹¹⁹ (McKay neglected to tell Ogden that in those last days of October he himself was nearly arrested.) Pankhurst was, and spent six months in prison on charges that she incited mutiny among the Armed Forces, a similar charge brought against Eastman and *The Masses* editorial collective. Her prison experiences can be found in a collection of poems, *Writ on Cold Slate*.¹²⁰ She died in December 1960, in self-exile in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the "only foreigner buried in an area reserved for the patriots of the Italian war" (Romero xi). Like Walter Jekyll, who also renounced English society and politics and was laid to rest in his beloved adopted home of Jamaica, Pankhurst spent her last years working for Ethiopian independence. She was, like Nancy Cunard and Crystal Eastman, a white radical who was receptive to black desires.

McKay offered an image of hope and progress to Pankhurst and others at the *Dreadnought*. It would be closure to a nineteenth-century relationship of suffrage to civil rights. In "Exhortation," a poem that resembles "If We Must Die," it would be Ethiopia - and Africa - that are evoked as a tribute to this union. But this is a different Ethiopia than the one McKay wrote about in "Invocation," which inspired him as "The worthy singer of my world and race." Masquerades, ghosts, even children become accomplices in a

35,000 deaths resulted when he ordered the advance on fortified machine-gun positions. His insanity was recorded for posterity: "My centre is giving way, my right is retreating; situation excellent. I shall attack."

¹¹⁹ McKay to Ogden, October 9, 1920. William Ready.

centuries-old slumber, where "deep primeval forests" keep one "heavy-lipped." The Ethiopian unites these traditions in revolutionary struggle.

Through the pregnant universe rumbles life's terrific thunder
And Earth's bowels quake with terror; strange and terrible storms break,
Lightning-torches flame the heavens, kindling souls of men thereunder:
Africa! Long ages sleeping, Oh my motherland, awake!

In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn that is breaking,
And its golden glory fills the Western skies: -
Oh my brothers and my sisters, wake! Arise!
For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead are waking,
Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's disguise,
And the foolish, even children, are made wise;
For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new world in making -
Oh my brothers, dreaming for dim centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn your eyes!

Of the night is sweet for sleeping, but the shining day's for working;
Sons of the seductive night, for your children's children's sake,
From the deep primeval forests where the crouching
Leopard's lurking,
Lift your heavy-lidded eyes, - Ethiopia awake!

In the East, the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn that is breaking,
And its golden glory fills the western skies: -
Of my brothers and my sisters, wake! Arise!
For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead are waking,
Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's disguise,
And the foolish, even children, are made wise;
For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new world in making -
Of my brothers, dreaming for long centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the East, turn, turn your eyes! ¹²¹

McKay, inspired by Pankhurst, found a new revolutionary position for Africa. But that position and poem would be questioned by Ogden as an example of "propaganda." Yet

¹²⁰ A detailed account of McKay's last days at the *Dreadnought* is in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*. McKay boasted that material that he acquired from a disgruntled sailor sparked the raid. See also Kathryn V. Lindberg's account in *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism*, p. 37.

¹²¹ "Exhortation" first appeared in *Spring in New Hampshire* and as "Exhortation - 1919" in *America*. Not since "Invocation," written in 1914, had McKay written about Ethiopia. The addition of the date gives the impression that the poem was penned as an immediate response to the unrest of 1919.

McKay's springtime in Cambridge and London gave him a firm base as a radical public intellectual, and under Ogden's eye, the racial anger was more diluted and the poet's style fuller. Africa and Pankhurst, Robert Burns and Emma Goldman, William Worthsworth and Marcus Garvey were worked into literary traditions that informed his childhood with Jekyll: Charles Dickens (particularly *Hard Times*, which inspired McKay to write his first poem in 1909) in England and Walt Whitman in America (the epigraph to *Negroes in America* begins with Whitman's call to "active rebellion"). Ogden, however, was determined to keep the book as universal as possible, beyond Harlem, the New Negro, and exoticism, even as McKay nervously eyed an American market.

I must thank you for all the unselfish interest and the trouble you have taken in making selections and choosing the style of the volume even when fearful of delays. I was often impatient and troublesome. The more I read the preface, the more I like it - so quiet and dignified it is - quite in keeping with the whole tenor of the verses." ¹²²

And the book would stand as the colonial poet's contribution to that English culture he'd been educated to admire and accept as his own patrimony, and as such he deserves a place in black British history along with a group of radical pacifists who were able to cross the color line.

¹²² *Spring in New Hampshire* conjured for McKay "associations which would mean little to the present generation of Americans to whom New England is quite played out" and wanted a different title. (McKay to Ogden, Saturday, William Ready). Possibly, Ogden saw more enduring associations with Robert Frost's "Hampshire" sensibility. Frost moved to England in 1912 and published his first book of poems, *A Boy's Will* (London, D. Nutt, 1913). Ezra Pound reviewed it favorably, which helped establish Frost's career in America and England. Much of the pastoral is contained in the later *North of Boston* (1914) and *New Hampshire* (1923), and Ogden may have associated McKay Island sensibility with Frost's style. McKay was persistent however: "I much prefer a terse, simple thing covering the collection or your first suggestion, Poems or Verse. Or if it must be the title of one of the poems, wouldn't 'Dawn in New York' do?" (McKay to Ogden, June 23, 1920. William Ready.) Ogden's thinking prevailed, and even convinced McKay of the book's merit, which he would cherish throughout his stormy literary and racial career. McKay to Ogden, October 9, 1920. William Ready.

Fundamentally, for the present, the Negro is radical only on race matters, in other words, a forced radical, a social protestant rather than a genuine radical.

- Alain Locke, 1936¹

IN TRAVELING TO LONDON, MCKAY WAS ABLE TO BREAK from his own sense of a racial group identity that fixed him within Harlem and New Negro esthetics. Consequently, the English pastoral and Romantic traditions assumed greater importance. But, in a newer, fresher sensibility, with Ogden's help. Building upon the perspective in "Invocation," which ruptured the paternalism of Booker T. Washington, his "Rest in Peace" is a sadly melancholy dirge to Harlem and its "Negro belt." McKay also uses the poem to bid farewell to his "menial task" of a series of subsistence jobs in America, and embarks upon his "longed-for port" - freedom from American prejudice - and the type of elitism associated with the New Negro of Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois. It marks, for the poet, the rejection of one tradition for another.

No More for you the citv's thorny ways,
The ugly corners of the Negro belt;
The miseries and pains of these harsh days
But you will never, never again be felt

No more, if still you wander, will you meet
With nights of unabating bitterness,
They cannot reach you in your safe retreat,
The citv's hate, the city prejudice!

¹ "Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane," *Survey Graphic* (August, 1936, Vol. 25, No. 8, p. 457).

Not only is the poet navigating traditions and desires, set adrift much like Shakespeare in his pursuit of a “darkly mistress” across wide oceans in an interior “saucy bark,” McKay also shifts his focus from the city to the countryside.² But unlike the idyllic mountaintops of Jamaica, the countryside is of England’s Romanticized past. The city is associated with toil and hatred. “They cannot reach you in your safe retreat,” he notes, of these miseries and pains, the “ugly corners of the Negro belt.” Is the poet expressing his distaste for the narrow politics of “race men,” such as DuBois and Locke? Yet the “ugly corners” also evoke another perspective: the fear of conformity, which in McKay’s mind was associated with the cultural politics in America. The “you” here is never identified, yet there is an inkling, by the last stanza, that the “you” is the spirit of the poet. “T’was sudden – but your menial task is done” (my italics), the poet reflects, upon leaving the United States for England.

The dawn now breaks on you, the dark is over,
The sea is crossed the longed-for port is won,
Farewell, oh fare you well! Fond friend and lover.

Exile, for McKay, signifies liberation and poetic freedom. But his body – much like a palimpsest that has own and new writing – is split along geographic sensibilities of the colonial and modern condition. His racial representation is on the shores of New York, while his spirit – this elusive English “soul” – is in pursuit of a “longed-for port” in England, bringing to mind the rock-solid tradition of a Renaissance sonneteer. The title is also enigmatic: “Rest in Peace” can be interpreted as a eulogy for this radicalized black

² Sonnet LXXX. There are many similarities to Shakespeare’s navigational metaphors, as in Sonnet LVI: “Let this interim like the ocean be/Which parts the shore, where two-contracted new/Come daily to the banks.”

body, which will be transformed in London? It also might be a more formal requiem for New York and the world it evokes (capitalism, the New Negro, American racism).

These palimpsest crossovers were a common mood of McKay's England-American sensibility, and is found in "After the Winters" (reprinted from the *Liberator*, but revised and titled "After the Winter" in England).³ In England, the racial body is more ethereal. McKay saw this body as stretched across oceans. In America, are McKay's feet and limbs, which are tortured in toil, a place where he would be "crucified." In England, his search for that soul is all-consuming, what the Coleridge describes as "everywhere and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."⁴ The poem begins:

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
And against the morning's white
The shivering birds beneath the eaves
Have sheltered for the night,
We'll turn our faces southward, love,
Toward the summer isle
Where Bamboos spire to shafted grove
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

The second stanza of *The Liberator* version, however, concludes:

And we will seek the quiet hill
Where towers the cotton tree,
And leaps the laughing crystal rill,
And works the droning bee.
And we will build a lonely nest
Beside an open glade,
And there forever will we rest,
O love - O nut-brown maid.

But in England, Ogden offered a more gentle, rustic image (when he assembled McKay's poems for *Cambridge Magazine*), while still seeking the "same quiet hill"

³ July 1919.

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV.

Where towers the cotton tree,
And leaps the laughing crystal rill
And works the droning bee

The poet "will build a cottage there," rather than a "lonely nest," with his loved one.

Beside an open glade,
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near
And ferns that never fade.

Ogden's influence is evident in the elision of "nut-brown maid," which ends the poem in nature's bosom instead of love's "lonely nest," which stretches the Romantic gaze, from the ethereal and corporeal to an all omniscient "open glade." The change in the title, from "Winters" to "Winter," also adds allegorical texture to the amorous affair. McKay's revision focuses upon a rustic cottage overlooking "black-ribbed blue-bells" and "ferns that never fade," a complex botanical allusion that fixes an ancestral resting-place in the earlier "My Mountain Home" (the ferns) with "black-ribbed blue-bells," which have always been associated with England. This is more poetic than the *Liberator* version, which ended with a "lonely nest" shared with his "nut-brown maid." The Romantic tradition and the familiar landscape of English literature overrun and intersect with the colonial flora - but the palette doesn't become cluttered with the clichéd images of an American black poet. Clearly, these poems have more of a claim to the English tradition than work by expatriate Americans such as T.S. Eliot, and should be included in English modernist anthologies.

Likewise, "To Work" and "When Dawn Comes to the City" have a divided esthetic and show a metropolis - New York - not only divided from night to day, but along divisions of labor as well (it is in New York, where the body is tortured and racialized;

exploited and politicized).⁵ "To Work" depicts the laboring forces within the fringe service industries in, for instance, Harlem – such as restaurant or dining-car work– and the stark transformation in those late night hours, in which "the mighty city is asleep." In New York, as McKay winds his way to and from work, he passes the ghostlike cars carrying the "women and the men of garish nights." "I have a mania for wandering," McKay had remarked to Ogden, and it is those early morning hours of the city as workers retire after a hard night's work that inspires: "late at night in the central business district under the great buildings when they are empty of life and traffic is stilled."⁶

We have a clear sense of the brief intersecting of two worlds and two lifestyles, which then move "On through the waning shadows of New York" of the early morning. Colors are muted and less sharp; the dawn carries with it the "crimson-tinted," an allusion to the sordid multitudes or hoped-for rays of light. McKay noted in his autobiography that in America, he

did not come to the knowing of Negro workers in an academic way, by talking to black crowds at meetings, nor in a bohemian way, by talking about them in cafes. I knew the unskilled Negro work of the city by working with him as a porter and longshoreman and as waiter on the railroad.

But DuBois and others had an impatience with McKay's rough-and-tumble nightlife of the city, especially depictions in *Home to Harlem*, a world in which no one seemed to work. Yet is deceiving. Many of his characters did work – at the margins – at temporary long-shore

⁵ McKay wrote numerous poems on the city, particularly on his return to New York. Unlike other Harlem writers, McKay chronicled the less glorious service, the industry working class, discriminated by the trade unions and mocked by the black elite.

⁶ McKay to Ogden, February 25, 1920. William Ready. "Up To Date," p. 1. Harry Ransom.

jobs, or cleaning and waiting at night or early morning. These were the only jobs that were available.⁷

The Dawn! The Dawn, the crimson-tinted comes
Out of the low still skies, over the hills,
New York's fantastic spires and cheerless domes, -
The Dawn! My spirit to its spirit thrills.
Almost the mighty city is asleep,
No pushing crowd, no trampling, tramping feet;
But here and there a few cars, groaning, creep
Along, above and underneath the street,
Bearing their strangely-ghostly burdens by, -
The women and the men of garish nights,
Their eyes win-weakened and their clothes awry,
Nodding under the strong electric lights.
On through the waning shadows of New York,
Before the Dawn, I wend my way to work.

The poem focuses, again, on this transcendental juncture where the two cultures of night and day intersect. The poet also is caught between nature and culture, much like the esthetic transition from Jekyll to Ogden, New York to London. In New York, where the poem is set, that juncture - in other poems, the dance floor - is riddled with black and white bodies, an American "hell" of scorched flesh and dreams.

BUT THIS ENGLISH "SOUL," SO MUCH A PART OF MCKAY'S ESTHETIC, was battered when the Max Eastman began editing *Harlem Shadows*, which was the American complement to the *Spring in New Hampshire*. In contrast to Ogden's style, Eastman reveals a disturbing provincialism and stereotyping of race that McKay had clearly departed from on his return

⁷ "The average colored man in Harlem," DuBois explained defensively, "is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and is as conservative and as conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere"

to New York in 1921. He, in fact, resuscitated the radical body. Eastman flattened the lyrical and Romantic images in poems like "The Choice," "Dawn Comes to the City," "Castaways," and "Sukee River." McKay was anxious, and at one point admitted to Ogden that he wanted his publisher, Alfred Knopf, to produce an edition "as nearly as possible as yours and I have written him to that effect."⁸ New York publishers, McKay realized, were proprietary about things related to Harlem and the New Negro, and McKay surmised there was also resentment. McKay remarked

Knopf wouldn't even consider it, even though he was eager before I went to Europe. Harcourt, Brace and Co. wanted to make a book of the hate poems (racial poems somewhat like DuBois' *Darkwater* if you have seen it, if not I shall send you a copy), but I objected. Max has been lazing on the preface - but his book is finished and now he has time to do it.⁹

Even Eastman resisted McKay's English lyricism (a hypocritical attitude that pertained only to black poets whose verse needed policing).¹⁰ While Ogden pulled in one direction, Eastman pushed in another.

In Eastman's grasp, New York's "fantastic spires" are flattened to "Manhattan roofs." The "women and men of garish nights" who were obviously "nodding" to sleep, become "Grotesques beneath the strong electric lights" (is this Eastman's commentary on the inappropriateness of such behavior?). Instead of the compact couplet that closes with

(quoted in *Harlem Renaissance Reader*, p. 107).

⁸ Emphasis in the original. McKay to Ogden, August 7, 1920. William Ready.

⁹ McKay to Ogden, October 2, 1921. William Ready.

¹⁰ James Rorty vilified this obsession in a *New Masses* article (October 1926): "Why do Negroes express so little beyond the black-white relation? Why don't they speak forthrightly as free untamed human beings? Are Negroes really savages? So many of them look, talk and write like sophisticated, tamed, adapted, behavioristic white men, and if that is what they want to be, it is nothing in the way of an inspiration."

the poet's passage out of "the waning shadows of New York" – a clear connection to those same murky, genderless existences elsewhere – the Eastman version ends with

The shadows wane. The Dawn comes to New York.
And I go darkly-rebel to my work.

Other revisions, which include the stilted "darkly-rebel," tell much about the presumptions of white radicals in America – and reveals Eastman's own predilection for using such phrases as "marching" river ice in spring and "stern-lipped fish at the aquarium" in his own poems.¹¹ Eastman was described as a "fine type of man – rather handsome and devoid of mannerisms," while Ogden, on the other hand, was overly sensitive about the harm done to one's image with "word-magic," as he called it. Teetering between these two worlds, McKay felt inferior and overwhelmed.

There is more between you both, then there is between me and either of you. I am primitive, restless, impatient, with a flair for beautiful things that I love to see as rare flowers among weeds.¹²

"Castaways" was another casualty. It is a rendering of the earlier "The Park in Spring," and reflects McKay's panoptic vision of the diaspora. The poem evokes "reminiscences" and "dreams" that connect to an "imaginary" place. Like "The Park in Spring," which explored seasonal change in a confined urban landscape, "Castaways" opens that oppression to the plight of women everywhere, reflecting the international concerns of feminism. McKay makes reference now to "The castaways of the earth,"

¹¹ His first book was a slim volume of blank verse titled *Child of the Amazon and Other Poems* (1913). Eastman's "Conventional Life" begins: "Midnight is coming/And thinly in the deepness of the gloom/Truth rises startle-eyed out of the tomb. /And we are dumb." *Child of the Amazon* was reviewed in *Survey Graphic* ("The

With many a withered woman wedged between,
And over all life's shadows dark and deep:
Moaning, I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not see.

But in its New York crossing, "The Castaways" are no longer of "the earth," but *of life* and have become *some* instead of the many, these "withered women" who are so "desolate and mean." Does this reflect Eastman's own ambivalence toward suffrage and internationalism, which changed dramatically from those heady days in the teens, or the echoes of his own stilted attempts at verse, in which women were "old and wild/Homeless, unchaste, worn with the battle anger"?¹³ The plight of the many women has been reduced to a life that was "wedged between" society's concerns, a comment on women's devaluation in the aftermath of war.

Likewise, "Sukee River" shows McKay's unique lyrical voice, in his literary transaction between colonial and English traditions, a reworking of an earlier ballad in Jamaica dialect that was written in the Scottish tradition of Robert Burns. It also illustrates the power of racial discourse in America, England, and Europe - to the degree of obliterating the poet as *individual black artist* completely. The "dialect" version begins in ballad form with short, crisp lines:

I shall love you ever
Dearest Sukee River:
Dash against my broken heart,
Nevermore from you I'll part,
But will I stay forever,
Crystal Sukee River.

Muse and the 'Causes,'" July 5, 1913), p. 489. The reviewer's advice was not to "abandon the Muse for Causes, however sacred," which Eastman ignored.

¹² McKay to Ogden, 1922. William Ready.

¹³ "Child of the Amazon," in *Child of the Amazon and Other Poems*.

The poem ends with a "Foamin' Sukee River" that is

Dearer now dan ever,
I'll ne'er roam from you again
To a life o' so-so pain,
Crystal flowin' river,
Dearer now dan ever.

In England, McKay relaxed the line to iambic pentameter, and sculpted a Shakespearean sonnet. He admitted to Ogden that he deliberately borrowed from Ernest Dawson's "Cynara," particularly the "finishing couplets," in his rush to update the poem. It did not, however, compromise the poet's originality, which Ogden wanted to keep pure of bad European influences.¹⁴

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,
Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast.
What black-faced boy gambols on thy brink,
Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?
What naked lad doth linger long by thee,
And run and tumble in the sun-scorched sand.
Or heed the pea-dove in the wild fig tree,
While I am roaming in an alien land?
No wonder that my heart is happy never,
I have been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

When from my early wandering I returned,
Did I not promise to remain for ye?
Yet instantly for other regions yearned
And wearied of thee in a single day.
Thy murmurs sound now in my anguished ears,
Creating in my heart a world of pain;
I see thee wistful flowing down the years
And though I pine, afar I must remain:
No wonder that my feet are faltering ever,
I have been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

Though other boys may frolic by thy side,
I know their merry moods thou dost not heed
When I, O mother of my soul and bride,
Lie on strange breasts and on strange kisses feed.
Sometimes, kind fate permitting me, I dream
I am floating on thy bosom of deep blue,
A child again, beloved, unchanging stream;

¹⁴ McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920, William Ready.

But soon I wake to find it all untrue:
I vowed that never, never would we sever,
But I've been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

But, again, the heavy hand of Eastman reworked the poem (actually we don't know who was responsible; and appeared to have been rushed into print without a thorough editorial checking). In 1953, at the height of the cold war era and the Civil Rights Movement, the poem (included in *The Selected Poems of Claude McKay*) became two disjointed stanzas, reflecting two poetic directions and forms.

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,
Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast,
What black-faced boy gambols on thy brink,
Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?
What naked lad doth linger long by thee,
And run and tumble in the sun-scorched sand,
Or heed the pea-dove in the wild fig tree,
While I am roaming in an alien land?
No wonder that my heart is happy never,
I have been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

I shall love you ever
Dearest Sukee River:
Dash against my broken heart,
Nevermore from you I'll part,
But will I stay forever,
Crystal Sukee River.

This is a major literary offense. The poem begins with the last stanza of the Ogden version, and ends the opening stanza of the Jamaican version; what's more, it eluded a mention in the Contents, which means that it might have been a hasty emendation to show the poet's Island sensibility. "Sukee River" in ballad or sonnet, is beautiful. (It was quoted in the November 1912 *Westminster Review* as "a specimen" of the author's "nondialectic poetry.") But the Eastman version is hackneyed – an insult to a poet who discarded dialect for precisely that reason. Unlike his other poems, this one stumbles aimlessly between two ill-defined sensibilities.

While loss of authorial control may be viewed positively as a mark of postmodernity (see Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author in *The Critical Tradition*, or Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author in *Image-Music-Text*) the revision to McKay's "Sukee River" was a crude racial impersonation. One can only read with irony the critic Laura Riding's pronouncements on authorial control: "once the poems are 'made,'" she noted, the poets' "personal activity ceases in them. They begin a life of their own . . . that they reach the reader at all is an accident, an affair entirely between them and the reader."¹⁵ But Riding also cautioned that "certain poems demand to be written" for their era. Such was, I believe, the desires of Eastman in rewriting "Sukee River," and the masquerade he enacted in appropriating a black radical poetic tradition.

In "Reminiscences" (which along with "Flowers of Passion," "To Work," and "Love Song" did not survive the crossing) the ends, or boundaries, of empire are stretched across oceans instead of neighborhoods. City smells evoke the poet's idyllic childhood. But the poet's toil in England and America also evokes the peasant life in rural Jamaica, where voices call "O'er the billows of the sea." The voices are cultural as well as indigenous, the call of a modern Black Atlantic consciousness.

When the day is at its dimmest
 And the air is wild with snow,
 And the city's at its grimmest
 In mine eyes there is a glow
 When the day is at its brightest
 And the city is a dream,
 And my heart is at its lightest,
 In mine eyes there is a gleam;
 For I'm thinking, O I'm thinking,
 Of an old worn sugar-mill

¹⁵ Laura Riding, *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, 1928.

Where the southern sun is sinking –
 Gold and crimson – o’er the hill’
 And I hear the toilers talking
 As they shoulder pick and hoe,
 And I watch their steady walking
 To the quiet plain below.
 O! I see the white stream dashing
 Gay and reckless through the brake,
 O’er the root-entwined rocks washing
 Swiftly, madly to the lake;
 O! I hear the waters falling,
 Flowing, falling, flowing free.
 And the sound of voices calling
 O’er the billows of the sea.

McKay’s poetic imagination, much like Coleridge’s notion of “soul,” brings comfort to this diasporic web of exile. Such transcendence lessened the disjunction of the poet’s real predicament. The barrenness of his surroundings is eased by the beauty of the nature of his youth; the loneliness and despair ameliorated by the power of imagination. “Winter in the Country,” a poem that exemplifies the unity that Ogden was seeking, contrasts a diasporic toiler’s hovel in the city against an idyllic countryside. But this naturalized setting ruptures the enveloping metropolis, another site for culture.¹⁶

Sweet life! How lovely to be here
 And feel the soft sea-laden breeze
 Strike my flushed face, the spruce’s fair
 Free limbs to see, the lesser trees”

 Bare hands to touch, the sparrow’s cheep
 To heed, and watch his nimble flight
 Above the short brown grass asleep.
 Love glorious in his friendly might,

 Music that every heart could bless,
 And thoughts of life serene, divine,
 Beyond my power to express
 Crowd round this lifted heart of mine!

 But oh! To leave this paradise
 For the city’s dirty basement room,

¹⁶ The working title for *Spring in New Hampshire* was “Tropics in New York,” which juxtaposed a black, toiling persona against pristine English and American traditions. Ogden, of course, vetoed the racial implications of the title.

Where beauty hidden from the eyes,
 A table, bed, bureau and broom
 In corner set, two crippled chairs
 All covered up with dust and grim
 With hideousness and scars of years,
 And gaslight burning weird and dim,
 Will welcome me . . . And yet, and yet
 The sea-wind here, the winter birds,
 The glory of the soft sunset,
 There come to me in words.

The poem is therapeutic and self-revelatory; how lovely to be *here* (the interior), the poet notes, in contrast to *there* (the exterior). Words come in a rush that “crowd around this lifted heart of mine,” much as Alfonso’s songs blossom forth from his “glory-hole,” in another poem, “Alfonso, Dressing to Wait at Table, Sings.” But the “glory of the soft sunset,” where the tranquility of nature relieves his anguish, is further worked out with Alfonso. “Down in the glory-hole,” where Alfonso sings,” is an *interiorized* dance floor that connotes homosexuality against its more common demarcation as a cleaning closet for hired help. Glory-hole, also a transition in one’s identity, is a dressing room where he may shed the veil between reality and fantasy, whiteness and blackness, sexual freedom and inhibition. In McKay’s *Banjo* “The Ditch” is a diasporic exploration of the interstitiality between performance and authenticity.¹⁷ Like that motley mix, Alfonso is outside of nationalized markers; he can only sing while confined and shackled. The poet urges

But O! Alfonso, wherefore do you sing
 Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places?
 Soon shall we be beset by clamouring
 Of hungry and importunate palefaces.

¹⁷ This comes out of an Afro-American tradition of what I call “undergroundedness”. Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* is a significant moment; also Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground,” and of course Ralph Ellison’s illuminated basement in *Invisible Man*.

THOUGH McMAY RETURNED TO AMERICA IN 1921, following the news that *Spring in New Hampshire* would be published by Knopf, he left England with a clearer perspective of Empire, and a prophetic vision of what awaited him in New York's "cultured hell." The poem "Baptismal," I believe, expresses McKay's anxieties upon returning to America and the religiosity of race. But "Baptismal," in its trans-Atlantic move, became a religious marker for McKay's political conversion, imagined by Eastman and others. John Dewey in his introduction (which was eliminated soon after) called the "religious suggestion" more about "color and atmosphere" than theology, and was more about "being a black man in a white man's world."¹⁸

Into the furnace let me go alone;
 Stay you without in terror of the heat.
 I will go naked in-for thus 'tis sweet-
 Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.
 I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
 You will not note a dicker of defeat;
 My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
 My mouth give utterance to any moan.
 The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
 Red asphish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
 Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
 Transforming me into a shape of dame.
 I will come out, back to your world of tears,
 A stronger soul within a finer frame.

"Baptism" is a coda to "Rest in Peace," which inaugurated his movement to England. Yet England - its politics and its concerns - would become undone in less than a year's stay. While privately McKay referred to himself as "a primitive," he was not a racial native, in any way. In America, where fears of racial dissolution permeated cultural discourse, McKay stood out as unique because of his influences (Olivier, the Jekylls,

¹⁸ John Dewey, "Introduction," *The Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953), p. 8.

Panhurst, Ogden), and Eastman note of the *orality* of McKay's poems, which were sung by "this most alien race among us."¹⁹ McKay's decision to identify himself with English literary traditions, and not American radicalism, was clear at the center of their rift.

By the 1950s, Eastman had become less accepting of those who strayed from his fantasy of politics, which were sometimes contradictory. He was a shell of the notorious inter-nationalist and independent editor and feminist, and more of a measured cold war pragmatist, celebrating American values. At a March 29, 1952 meeting of American Committee for Cultural Freedom, for instance, Eastman defended Joseph McCarthy and accused his old friend Floyd Dell of "working for the government" - "persuading yourself that is measure of social reform were all you had ever meant by socialism."²⁰ In his 1953 note to the *Selected*, the 69-year-old roving editor dwelled upon McKay's striking physical traits (with echoes of the 1920s and Paul Robson), and described as

of middle height and dark chestnut hair. In feature and expression he strangely resembled a portrait of King Christopher of Haiti that was published many years ago in the *London Illustrated News*. His eyebrows arch high up and never came down, and his finely modeled features wore in consequence a fixed expression of ironical and rather mischievous skepticism. Claude was ironical and mischievous too, and acutely intelligent both about people and politics. His laughter at the frailties of his friends and enemies, no matter which - that high, half-wailing falsetto laugh of the reckless delighted Ducky - was the center of my joy in him throughout our friendship of more than thirty years.

¹⁹ Eastman, *Harlem Shadows* (1922).

²⁰ Quoted in O'Neill, p. 235, *Diggins' Up From Communism*; see O'Neill, p. 233; see Daniel James' "The Debate on Cultural Freedom" *New Leader*, April 7, 1952, p. 34.

The choice of "Darky," which he used in 1922 to describe someone with "a little culture" who spoke in "great big words" and his sarcastic mention of a *London Illustrated News* photograph, reveal a deep-seated anger towards McKay's literary success and Englishness.²¹

Eastman did not like sharing the spotlight, particularly alongside his nemesis John Dewey, who praised the book unconditionally.²² Dewey and Eastman first met through an acquaintance of Crystal's, and the philosopher was instrumental in getting the young radical a teaching position at Columbia University; in exchange, Eastman helped Dewey edit his papers. Yet later the two had a falling out over politics and pragmatism. Dewey's determined open mind (calling Russia the most interesting experiment in the world, in *Impression of Soviet Russia*, 1927, for instance), made Eastman uncomfortable. While Dewey and McKay forged a relationship in the 1930s and 1940s around international politics and writer's unions, Eastman's resentment built. Their friendship ended when Dewey began criticizing Eastman for his confusion over science and methodology, calling his

²¹ Eastman also may have been jealous of McKay, who forcefully spoke out on racial issues at the Moscow conference of the Third International, and was viewed as a hero by the workers and peasants in the Russian countryside. McKay planned to reveal the hypocrisies of white radicals in America in a series of articles and books that were planned in Moscow. When DeWitt Wallace hired Eastman in the 1940s as a "roving editor" for *Reader's Digest*, he was 60 years old and broke, according to his biographer, a situation he shared with McKay. Eastman however received \$10,000 a year for first option on anything he might write, and \$1,200 for articles. This was a generous sum no radical magazine then or now could have matched, and led some critics to speculate that the magazine was an anti-communist front. Eastman wrote a review of William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* in 1951 and when the *National Review* was founded in 1955 Eastman was listed as associate and contributor. He later requested his name be removed when it became apparent the magazine was to be a conservative rather than libertarian magazine. He became increasingly annoyed by the turn in editorial policy toward the Christian right wing in the United States (see O'Neill, p. 240, 242).

²² Dewey's introduction concerned the poet in society, in marked contrast to Eastman's crude physical description. Dewey also showed humility: "I feel it decidedly out of place to refer to him as the voice of the Negro people; he is that, but he is so much more than that. . . . No white man can do more than express his humiliated sympathy" (*Selected* 9). But Dewey's introduction was eliminated from the paperback edition.

assumptions "naïve," in Eastman's attacks on Marxism in *Artists in Uniform*, a series of essays that were published in *Modern Quarterly*, edited by V.F. Calverton.²³

In editing the poems and writing McKay's body, I imagine that Eastman was seeking closure to a discourse that strangely derailed in the 1920s. A hint of the forces at work in shaping McKay's esthetics is found in the original title, "The Word: Poems Old & New." And in its place was suggested "The Word, The Flesh, and The Negro." The first deletions, which offended Eastman the most, concerned McKay's newfound religion, Roman Catholicism, which was unsuitable for a black radical. All of the later poems, which appeared in *Catholic Worker*, for instance, were cut.²⁴ "It would be fair to the poet to delete it!" read one editor's marginalia. "I agree" was the reply. The poem "Faith" was deemed unpublishable, "in fact should DELETE it," was the offered suggestion. Eastman agreed: "You MUST delete it." "I Turn to God" was considered an "Extremely POOR poem."²⁵ Soon the texture of the collection - "The Word" as a spiritual journey for the poet - changed as well. The title poem was reduced to an epigraph, and read, out of context, much like "Sukee River." Eastman was mercenary, as if McKay, the black poet, was his chattel, to do with as he pleased.

Oh spread Thy words like green fields, watered, fresh
The Word is God and the Word is made flesh!

²³ O'Neal, p. 16, 146.

²⁴ Although Dorothy Day had a long history with radicalism - she was on the staff of the *Masses*, for instance, in those early years - Eastman never appreciated Day's unique brand of left-leaning Catholicism. In a 1946 letter, Eastman scolded McKay for "letting a little ignorant-minded neurotic like Dorothy Day" influence him. He also called McKay's involvement with the *Catholic Worker* and Dorothy Day a "tragic fact." James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

²⁵ All references are to the galley proofs in the Claude McKay Archive, in the James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Phyllis Martin Lang, however, sees in the unedited "Word" a "complicated" vision, and notes that McKay was "greatly concerned with words, and he includes himself in those who have used words for betrayal" (248). She connected "The Word" to a consistent spiritual theme that ran through all of McKay's work, such as "O Word I Love to Sing" and "Baptism." It is, I might add, a theme that runs through the dialect poems as well. "Christ among the Dictators" was another "poor" poem. "Definitely delete," Eastman wrote to Carl Cowl, McKay's former agent. The poem "The New Day" likewise: "Absolutely, yes, it's awful," Eastman frowned. (But of the poem "A Prayer" Eastman caved in: "I would leave this in for Claude's sake," Eastman muse, and added parenthetically, "he wanted to dedicate it to me." The rearranging of the sections such as "Songs for Jamaica," "Baptism," "Americana," and "Different Places," for instance, are also misleading.²⁶ The section titled "Songs for Jamaica" might be confused (if you did not know the poet's work) with *Songs of Jamaica*, the 50-page chapbook published in dialect when the poet actually lived in Jamaica. The poems in "Songs for Jamaica" were all written when the poet lived in the United States, and the poems in the "Americana" section were all published in England. Eastman didn't give a hoot about contextualizing McKay and his esthetics.²⁷

²⁶ The section title "Americana" might have been inspired by a review of Eastman autobiography *Enjoyment of Living*, which appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* on April 11, 1948 that described his book as "a chapter of Americana." (see O'Neill, p. 254).

²⁷ Eastman had little empathy, while the younger Carl Cowl, who appeared to remain loyal to McKay's wishes throughout his later life, was unable to resist Eastman's compulsion to "omit these terrible poems." When *Harlem Glory* appeared in 1990, Cowl wrote the preface, and noted apologetically: "The politically forbidding climate of the 1940s, and the scary McCarthy period of the 1950s, caused publishers to shy away from his novel, and its searing criticism," Cowl explained. McKay "never ceased regarding black-white working-class solidarity as the prerequisite for solving the contradictions of capitalist societies." Cowl called McKay's fragmentary approach – *Harlem Glory* is subtitled "A Fragment of Aframerican Life" – "novelistic and different from the approaches of many writers of fiction." As Cowl pointed out: "The author of *Banjo* – which is

Eastman also trampled McKay's internationalist politics, which was thoroughly discredited in the cold-war years and called "If We Must Die" too popular for his taste and little more than race propaganda.²⁸ Of his crucial part in the Third International in 1922, Eastman wrote

There being no Negroes in Russia, Claude was taken up – and played up – to a degree that would have turned the head of anyone not endowed at birth with those skeptical eyebrows. Adopted as a kind of *mascot* by the Red Army and Navy, *entertained* everywhere at the state's expense, given a Grand Duke's bedroom and study to live and work in, *exhibited* on tribunes with the great leaders and orators of the revolution, Claude certainly *had the time of his life*²⁹

He was uninterested in his time in France and Morocco, where he lived "quietly" (so he believed) and wrote "books that had little to do with socialism." (Those books – *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, *Banana Bottom*, *Romance in Marseilles* – of course, are crucial texts in establishing the esthetics of a black radical diaspora.)

In the end, McKay was refashioned as a cold-war ideologue, much like Eastman himself; and blamed McKay's destitution and sickness on the poet's unpopular anti-Communism, a reflection of Eastman's own political paranoia:

One word on the communist side would have brought him ease, comfort, contemporary fame and a good income. But he would not speak it. He chose instead to live in penury, and watch his fame and popularity gradually disappear from the earth (*Selected* 9).

significantly subtitled 'A Story without a Plot' – simply does not share the concerns of those who believe that every loose narrative thread must be neatly tied up in the end. . . . In this sense, McKay was a true realist than many writers who had borne this label, for life itself he considered 'a story without a plot' " (Cowl 7).

²⁸ McKay, too, in letters to Ogden, felt "If We Must Die" was overrated., and preferred instead the more muted "Exhortation" or "Rest in Peace." See McKay to Ogden, March 12, 1920. William Ready.

²⁹ My italics; *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*, pp. 111-112.

But this doesn't make much sense, since many leftists were also plunged into poverty as a result of McCarthyism. Just as Eastman confused the lyrical with the spiritual, he also confused politics with his own prejudices. Thus, the poet's destitution may have had less to do with radical politics than with resistance to an agenda based on racial identity, white liberalism, and national consensus. As I have argued, the poems of Claude McKay that circulated in the U.S. were partly the product of a heavy-handed editor. It is now time to look at the work again, along with the politics and power-plays of editors.

III

Between Diaspora and Internationalism

Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people is not savagery. It is culture.

~ Claude McKay, *Banjo* ¹

IF ENGLAND IS THE PLACE WHERE MCKAY ACQUIRED A KEY TO THE LANGUAGE OF THE colonizer, shedding his Island sensibility and dialect verse for an uneasy cosmopolitanism, Europe is where his internationalism evolves into a “motley” diaspora sensibility. While McKay’s journey begins with a rejection of Harlem’s New Negro intellectuals and of a particular racial history, it also is the second phase of a lifelong, nomadic search for authenticity: A quest in search of unity and artistic satisfaction that differed markedly from the bohemians or vagabonds of the era. The philosopher and poet John Dewey seemed aware of this when he noted that McKay’s writings, while he transversed European cultures, “reveal with startling vividness” an “unspoiled and immediately sensitive response to scenes of the world in which the physical and the human blend into an indivisible yet distinctive unity.” ²

¹ New York: Harcourt, 1990, p. 200.

² As a person of color who intimately connected with many divergent movements at the turn of the century (the Lost Generation, Proletarian writers, the little magazines of the 1920s, the anarchistic philosophies of Emma Goldman and the Wobblies) McKay was able to clearly define the differences between white émigré writers who could readily return to the United States and himself. Dewey’s appraisal appeared in his introduction to the 1953 edition of Claude McKay’s *Selected Poems*.

At first, McKay intended to return to the United States after his visit to Russia, where he lectured to the international proletariat (the Third International of the Communist Party). The poet, however, found himself - as other pacifists and internationalists - under intensive scrutiny by the FBI and State Department, which had issued an all-ports alert in the United States.¹ Instead, McKay followed a path that took him through the countryside of Russia, where he was lionized by his beloved "peasants," and onto Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, and, finally, Morocco, where the coexistence of Spanish and French culture alongside more native African and Basque cultures suited McKay's nomadic disposition.

Yet McKay's migratory trajectory followed diasporic public intellectuals - from Olaudah Equiano to Frederick Douglass - who wrote of Europe from the vantage of the once-conquered "native." Douglass had once said that "To be able to appreciate what may be seen and learned in Europe, one must have seen and learned something in America," and such a statement resonates remarkably within McKay's ambitious travels, where his poetic and political temperament during his postwar years matured as a result of having "seen and learned something in America." One of his best-known poetic pieces and one of the few chosen for his *Selected* (in which clearly half of poetic output did not see print while he was alive), chosen because it reflected erroneously the black state of mind while the poet lived in America, is "The Desolate City" (originally titled "Desolate" when it first appeared in a special "Caribbean Issue" of *Opportunity* in November 1926 and a year later in

¹ Most of this material is available under the freedom of information act, first requested by Tyrone Tillary. The FBI and the State Department was quite serious in halting McKay's return to the United States, and McKay would have been justifiably intimidated. Max Eastman, who had met McKay in Moscow, also found it difficult to return to the United States due to expired credentials. But Eastman

Countee Cullen's *Caroling the Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Black Poets and Other Poets of the Twenties*). Importantly, it builds upon an esthetic rooted in Jamaica: The integrity of the soil, urban duplicity, and cultural exploitation – but encompassing the sorry state of the world in and around WWI. With the rise nationalism and fascism, the poem conveys the cultural stagnation that McKay saw taking hold of Europe. It is a haunting piece of writing that answers the high modernists attacks on the masses, the vernacular, and the indigene.

The poem is a sketch of a “city” – possibly the architectural embodiment of Ruskin's nation-soul – that has been attempting to arise from the confines of war and western civilization. McKay's style is more individual, contemplative, rhymical, and sophisticated than his earlier pieces that were associated with a tradition of “Negro literature” in America, where he worked the tradition of reportage – those trans-Atlantic missives on horticulture and folklore. But here McKay is no longer the teacher, as he was with Olivier, Jekyll, and Ogden, but an explorer in quest of “the real thing.” There is also an undulating current of anxiety that takes on a direct, polemical, yet ambiguous poetic motion and tone. When “Desolate” resurfaced in 1953 in the post WWII cold war climate, it was altered, re-titled “The Desolate City,” and inappropriately placed in the “Baptism” section that precedes “Americana” in McKay's *Selected*. “Baptism” of course is misleading in the context and esthetics of the poem, since this grouping characterizes McKay's “conversion” – hence “baptism” – to American radical politics (although as I have attempted to show, McKay had a fuller understanding of international politics than assumed for most Negro intellectuals of that era.) In the book's chronology, “The Desolate City” has been erroneously coupled

was able to “pass” as a Soviet delegate, which allowed him to enter England for the summer. Max returned to the United States in 1927.

with "If We Must Die," a poem written under much different circumstances, during the late teens in America. Michel Fabre dates "The Desolate City" to 1923 when McKay first arrived in Paris, which would make it contemporaneous with, for instance, *The Waste Land*, and other post-WWI works that were preoccupied with Western malaise and elements contributing to European decadence.⁴ Other factors may have influenced McKay's bleak assessment of Western culture, however. At the time, the poet was recovering from syphilis, which he contracted soon after he left Moscow. But Fabre's date also makes sense in terms of thematic development, since McKay had been working on a cycle of poems titled *Miasma*, written about his hospital experience in Paris.

A letter from Harcourt, Brace & Company on April 24, 1924, to Schomburg refers to the manuscript "Miasma," possibly a section of the unpublished poems that are at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, in the James Weldon Johnson Collection of Yale University.⁵ There is a section titled "The Clinic," which is part of the manuscript "New Poems," that describes a sojourn in a dreary hospital ward (possibly chronicling his experiences when he was convalescing from syphilis). But that connection is uncertain. We know little else about "Miasma." What we do have however is a strange letter from McKay concerning poems that he entrusted to Schomburg and which he demanded that they be returned. In a 1926 note McKay wrote:

I've just got another letter from Locke in which he mentions that you are still thinking of publishing those poems of mine privately. I write back to you post haste because I do not want the poems published *now in any form*.

after a five-year absence. See O'Neill, *The Last Romantic*, p. 106, 121)

⁴ In *Black American Writers in France 1840-1980: From Harlem to Paris* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

⁵ McKay submitted the poems to Schomburg around the same time that he gave him the manuscript "Color Scheme." I believe these two works, had they been published, would have greatly altered the view that McKay was simply a "primitive" Harlem Renaissance writer. See Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, p. 120.

I thought I told you that expressly in a letter some time back. I am acting on good 'white America' advice' and it is a matter of material urgency to me that those poems should not be published for some years when I have a measure of security and can do as I please intellectually. Nor do I want the poems shown around to anybody else, Schomburg. I hope you understand and it would be better if you sent them back to me.

(The good "white American advice" may have come from his friend Max Eastman, who edited *Harlem Shadows* in 1922.)^o

Fabre also points out that McKay came under the influence of French symbolist writers such as Baudelaire (I would also add Russian poets, such as Mayakovski), and Rene Maran. He already read Victor Hugo and acquired an appreciation for the poet Arthur Rimbaud, who was inspired to write after a tour as an imperialist adventurer in North Africa.⁷ "The Desolate City," as with much of McKay's verse, can also be seen as a positive response to the critiques by modernists on so-called mongrelized cultures, which appeared with invigorated frequency during the height and aftermath of the war. McKay worked on a series of poems that exemplified these French influences at a time when many in America and England believed that McKay had renounced poetry. Thus none of these poems – such as "The Void," "The Patient," "Retreat," and "For Marguerite" have surfaced, either in the posthumous *Selected* or in any subsequent revisions. If they appeared later – as with "The Desolate City" in *The Selected Poems* – it was usually without notes or explanation, incongruously placed in a section, such as "Baptism," that distorted the poem's origins and meaning. Consequently the cultural positioning of "The Desolate City," like much of the

^oEastman once wrote to McKay, as if lecturing to an ill-behaved child, that he should always keep an eye to history, or else he would be discarded. In a September 9, 1946, letter, for instance he warned McKay about the political climate in the post-war Stalinist era: "In reply to your letter with the dreadful news that you, too, are mouthing the Stalinist propaganda slogans, I only want to say one thing: Please, for the sake of your name in history, don't make any public statements of this kind. Stick to your resolution not to write politically for those whom to call your 'friends in New York.'" (Eastman to McKay, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.)

critical reception to McKay's poetry in England or America, worked at detaching it from the international terrain of which McKay was so much a part. When, for instance, Max Eastman culled McKay's *Selected Poems*, it was primarily from reprints of *The Liberator* and *Harlem Shadows*, both of which he edited, written *before* the poet traveled to Europe in 1922. McKay carried poems around with him, although at one point, when he lived in Tangiers, he admitted to Nancy Cunard of not having written poems "in a while." He lamented later to his literary agent, Carl Cowl, when he returned to the United States, that his one hope would be to see a book of *new* poems - ones that he had worked on through his travels in England, Russia, Europe, and North Africa. In another letter to Ken McCormick, editor in chief at Doubleday, on December 8, 1947, McKay again pleaded for a collection that might "illustrate my growth in experience and ideas and my attitude towards life": a book that would be more esthetically honest rather than politically expedient. McKay wanted a work that would stand "on my own, rather than appear in a Negro anthology" as representative of Negro literature.⁸ The early postwar period was increasingly resistant to colonial critiques of European *culture*, particularly if that critique originated from an internationalist mode outside of the "conventional" colonial critiques that attempted to institute a national culture based on self-sufficiency. Thus, McKay found himself isolated, unable to reconnect with a tradition of early twentieth-century politics and discourse, a world of the Jekylls and Oliviers that was swept away in the mad rush toward national consolidations. McKay was uneasy in this new political formation.

⁷ In describing Frank Harris, McKay noted: "He stirred me sometimes like Byron and Heine, Victor Hugo and Rimbaud" (*A Long Way from Home*, p. 9).

⁸ The first edition of Arna Bontemps' *Poetry of the Negro, 1902-1948* originally appeared in 1949. Bontemps had contacted McKay about permission to reprint poems.

Cedric Dover, the Anglo-Indian editor who most represented this neocolonial perspective (a celebration of the native in the community of nations), planned to do a joint publishing project with McKay titled *East Indian West Indian* to enlighten Europeans to the colonial experience, warned of short-sightedness. Dover published the colonial magazine *The New Outlook* in 1925 at DuBois' encouragement, and later authored a collection of poems titled *Brown Phoenix* (London: College Press, 1950). He commented to McKay when the two met later in New York in the 1930s:

You cannot now say as you could twenty years ago that the poems must stand by themselves, speaking their own message. For many of them have become a part of history, and most of your present readers will want to know what that history was.

Yet Dover, like other cultural nationalists, was busy promoting a new postwar landscape, one which polarized insurgent and mainstream traditions along New Left ideology. Dover explained to DuBois in a November 4, 1950 letter that McKay needed to be brought "into our fold" even though by this time the poet had been dead for several years. Actually Dover wanted to recuperate McKay's image, to make him more ideologically useful for insurgent, colonial movements. Dover was also disturbed that the poet had been "very much used by Catholics and anti-progressives." (The extent of that abuse is unclear, since such Catholic friends as *Catholic Worker* editor Dorothy Day, published and helped McKay later in his life when he was a pariah among other leftists). Dover cowered before DuBois, hoping for his blessings for the East-West Indian project, and even referred to DuBois as "the Master and myself the pupil."⁹ Dover once described McKay as "the leader of the revolt in Negro literature," a type of racial category that always made McKay uneasy

⁹ *The Correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois* (vol. 11): Selections 1934-1944, pp. 193-94.

(just as Douglass found problematic his relationship to whites as a race leader.) In Dover's project to resuscitate McKay, returning him to "the fold," as he says, would have an opposite effect, and simply elide the poet's reputation further, particularly the work that was done during his travels in Europe.

Radicals from the ex-colonies, such as Dover, and early scholars of African-American literature, such as Jean Wagner, sought to limit the categories into which poets such as McKay could fit.¹⁰ Wagner was one of the first to call McKay "a poet of hate" par excellence, a designation based in large part on McKay's American reputation. And more recent scholars of African American literature, such as Addison Gayle, followed in that tradition, separating McKay's "violent sonnets" from those of "love and longing," a cultural (and highly contentious) designation at best (Gayle's characterization of McKay as "The Black Poet at War," the title of the pamphlet issued off Broadside Press in 1972, was more a reflection of the cultural nationalism of its day than of McKay's mental state).¹¹ But McKay distanced himself from race politics – or at least ignored those "historical gaps" he was expected to fill in (from Dover, but also DuBois and others). Instead, he devoted himself to writings of a more sensuous, idyllic type.

¹⁰ Such a discourse invariably narrowed in the 1960s. Harold Cruse in his book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) institutionalized a type of African American writing along a left/right axis: completing the political foundation begun by Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" in 1937. Cruse's work would continue to influence succeeding generations of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s in their perceptions of black artistic production. But Cruse's thesis has made us painfully aware of a racial body in varying states of deconstruction, whose essentialism was archived or discarded because it would not bent to the political economy.

¹¹ Thanks to Mervyn Morris for this important detail. Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, trans. Kenneth Douglass (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 225.

In "Another Claude McKay - A Poet of Love," the Jamaican scholar Mervyn Morris has noted that McKay wrote of "other concerns."¹² And, indeed, McKay was more than a "poet at war" (again, ironic, since he had been a pacifist during WWI and, again, an undeclared objector during WWII).¹³ Even during the height of racial unrest during the Red Summer of 1919 when he penned "If We Must Die, McKay saw himself differently. "At the time," he explained,

I was writing a great deal of lyric poetry and none of my colleagues on the *Liberator* considered me a propaganda poet who could reel off revolutionary poetry like an automatic machine cutting fixed patterns. If we were a rebel group because we had faith that human life might be richer, by the same token we believed in the highest standards of creative work.¹⁴

There were rumors, however, of a new grouping of lyric poems that were in circulation as early as 1926, a fact revealed in correspondence with Arthur Schomburg, the Afro-Puerto Rican Harlem archivist, and the poet Langston Hughes, in which themes of decay and madness were of importance. In "The Void," for instance, this inner psychological world collides with the physical, racial realities:

He crouches strangely in the little bed
And earnestly stares blankly into space,
Reason forever more from him has fled,
A child's mind settles sadly on his face.

¹² Morris cites James Giles (his biography *Claude McKay*, published in 1976), who noted that "A great deal of his poetry cannot be classified, directly or indirectly, as black protest" (Giles, p. 42). See "Another Claude McKay - A Poet of Love," in *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999).

¹³ The question of patriotism among blacks during time of war can be traced to a *Cross* editorial that condemned those who were pacifists during WWI or associated with the International Workers of the World as somehow working against the betterment of the race. The *Cross* noted: "We believe that the crushing of the monstrous pretensions of the military caste of Germany was a duty so pressing and tremendous that it called for the efforts of every thoughtful American. But we recognize that some people did not agree with us and these folks we honor for their honesty, even though we question their reasoning." The editorial concluded: "It is no credit to American Negroes if they had NO 'Conscientious Objectors.' It is tremendously to their credit that the vast majority of them thought straight and fought true in a mighty world crisis." 18:2 (June 1918) 60.

¹⁴ "A Negro Writer to His Critics," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 6, 1932. Quoted in Wayne Cooper, *The Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 134.

The classic loveliness of plain white walls,
The shadows softening the long, low ceiling,
Against the low dull lights at evening fall,
Impart to the sick room a holy feeling.

Maybe no hand once trembled with desire,
Sheer love of form, to touch that ugly brow,
But here disease-transformed, scourged by the fire,
Beauty the loftiest has touched it now.

This is the beginning of a psychological state that is explored later works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground." Many of the signifiers – white, shadows, fire – move from a binary, racial positioning to a self-conscious "narcissism" – or an awareness of one's body and limitations. McKay offered insight into the black body – a novel position for this black poet, in which the dominant ideology defined its shape, texture, and articulation (I'm remind of Frantz Fanon's comment in *Black Skin, White Mask*: "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact.") Much like the earlier "Baptism," McKay arrives at a universal understanding of beauty – a long sought-after quest for a Romantic ideal that transcends color. Some of these poems may have even circulated before 1926 among friends, and are personal, sarcastic, witty, sometimes funny, and, in terms of the later global political landscape of which Dover was a part in the 1950s, deadly accurate. Barbara Christian has noted that McKay wrote, "Not in the superficially racist context to which most of his critics alluded, but as a cultural context through which all his experiences were filtered."¹⁵ But McKay's poetry and life, as Dover predicted, would, indeed, become a "history" that would need

cultural repair, maintenance, and re-contextualizing. His sensibility and “emphasis on the black as a wholly complete human being,” as Barbara Christian noted, became incorporated into his European diet (15). While these poems remain largely untouched, they are crucial in understanding McKay’s quest toward a “wholly complete human being.”

In the mid-1920s, McKay was convinced by editor and longtime friend Frank Harris, who first published McKay in a 1918 *Pearson’s Magazine* issue, to rewrite and expand on a Negro story that would eventually become *Home to Harlem*, the first proletarian Black novel. When it appeared in the United States, McKay may have felt buoyed that the climate was right for him, again, to attempt a return to America. Yet it took him four more years to consider the advantages of such a move. It is ironic that one of his last works of fiction, “Romance in Marseilles,” would be about an optimistic African stowaway on a ship heading toward New York City from the south of France. McKay’s anxiety about returning is evident, and the story provides a summing up of his experiences in the rim culture of Marseilles. Inadvertently locked in a water closet, Lafela’s legs freeze, leaving him not only without limbs but, as a dancer in the Harlem economy of cabaret culture, without livelihood as well. McKay’s career upon returning to the United States was very much like Lafela’s predicament – a cultural amputation from which an artist never fully recovers even after years of recuperation. The name “Lafela” – which has its origins in the peasantry – also represents McKay’s unitary vision, which includes female and male traits. Lafela also works at deconstructing the political binary at work in nation-building.

¹⁵ In “Spirit Bloom in Harlem. The Search for a Black Aesthetic during the Harlem Renaissance: The Poetry of Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer,” p. 15. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Lafela is an outsider – a gay or straight hustler, possibly a pimp. Yet he is McKay's hero in this parodic journey to the New World.

THE CLAUDE MCKAY WHO WROTE "IF WE MUST DIE," which had become synonymous with the "new spirit" of the New Negro and provoked Congressional leaders fearful of race rage, did, indeed, have a quieter, gentler side: The solitary gaze of a boy in the mountaintop library overlooking the Jamaica terrain, the contemplative young poet in quest of English soul in the 1920s, the self-satisfaction in his discovering a "motley mix" in Marseilles who he felt akin to. McKay was a poet who straddled many cultures as well as poetic themes, yet his esthetic vision typecast him as the bad boy of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Continually referred to as a lone curiosity inexplicably connected to a European "negritude" and a diasporic sensibility in the 1930s, he was typecast a bitter segregationist (and reactionary!) in America. Throughout his life, however, he maintained a highly polished, lyrical voice, one which was attuned to the English traditions of Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, and even Hardy, and who knew and mastered the poetic conventions of Shakespeare and other Renaissance writers to the subtle nuances of twentieth-century race discourse – or, more accurately, those discourses not popular. His poems celebrated qualities much admired by the Romantics: Truth, Beauty, and a frenzied passion for all aspects of life – what Coleridge had called "soul." Yet while Romantic fervor was short-lived amid the political realities of the early industrial era, racial inequity was not one of those realities.

It was the so-called progressive spirit of the Harlem Renaissance era that unhinged McKay's poetic ambitions, with its distasteful focus upon national culture. The twentieth century, with W.E.B. DuBois' color line on one side and the weight of modernism on the other, would confine and ultimately thwart McKay's lyrical voice, as it did other poets. While McKay's reputation as "a radical Negro poet" was nurtured and cultivated in New York - and Harlem - in 1916, it peaked and ebbed abruptly with his political exile from the United States in 1922, when word of his participation at the Third International's Fourth Congress in Moscow sent the State Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation on a frenzied all-points alert for his possible entry. Tipped off that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the State Department were seeking to detain and question McKay on his return to the United States, the poet decided to extend his trip to Moscow indefinitely. He became an expatriate without passport or national identity, a poet who was feared as a subversive because he was black.¹⁶

While he maintained his credentials as a member of the I.W.W. and became known as a radical poet (by association with *The Liberator*, *Crisis*, and *Dreadnought*), McKay's reputation as a subversive within the State Department blossomed with his arrival in Europe. "According to information which I have received from a strictly confidential source, Claude McKay, the well known radical of New York City, contemplates going to Europe next month," wrote William J. Burns, director of the FBI, to W.L. Hurley of the

¹⁶ Passports were frequently denied to blacks because the U.S. government feared negative publicity abroad, particularly with the rise of lynchings and acts of discrimination and violence. The State Department, for instance, denied passports to delegates to the Pan-African Conference in Paris in 1919, fearing that "Negroes would tell Paris of lynchings here." (It appeared as a headline in the *New York Call*, which the *Crisis* quoted). In denying the passports to, among others, Ida B. Wells and Monroe Tropper, editor of the weekly *Boston Guardian*, the State Department feared that "peace delegates" would lobby for "internationalization of the former German colonies in Africa. *The Crisis* (March 1919), p. 237.

State Department. Soon after, on December 13, 1922, a month after the Third International convened on November 5, the United States Justice Department produced a radical sketch of McKay, along with the other Negro delegates to the Moscow convention, confirming McKay's suspicions that blacks would be used as "a trump card in their fight against the world revolution." The letter also attempted to portray McKay as a homosexual who was sympathetic to the International Workers of the World's causes. Since the Negro delegation would return via Chita and Shanghai, the director asked the customs officials in San Francisco and Seattle to detain the delegates and give them "a very thorough examination" (letter dated January 19, 1923). Not only was the Justice Department frustrated by its inability to track McKay, since almost all of the delegates had dual nationalities, no passports were issued by the State Department. "They no doubt went out and will return as sailors," noted FBI director William J. Burns in a letter to Roy A. Darling, in Seattle, Washington, on February 2, 1923.¹⁷ In Los Angeles a memo on January 1, 1923, circulated to all informants "in contact with the Communist Party of America, and confidential informants on Negro Activities . . . to watch out for subjects." The FBI wired bureaus around the nation to be on alert for McKay's entry. His mail to friends in New York City was intercepted by the post office, and information on his dealings with *The Crisis* and *The Liberator* were obtainable, from sources on those publications. One investigator - "Agent Titus" - relayed information (supposedly from Grace Campbell, a

¹⁷ This characterization as sailors complicates McKay's relationship to a diasporic esthetic, as scholars such as Paul Gilroy have discovered. Gilroy neutralizes the designation, particularly as it applied to McKay. For Gilroy McKay assumed the identity of a sailor for sexual, hedonistic reasons. He overlooks the political, however, or that McKay's masquerade was also a protest against - and a colonial response to - the boundaries of empire and national identities, which arose with the implementation of passport system. Many radicals, particularly those of color, simply refused to renew or submit to this fairly recent surveillance system, which they felt was enacted to control their movements. Internationalists flaunted their global citizenship, and challenged all borders that confined them.

Harlem socialist) of McKay writing a friend in New York that he never intended to return to the United States.

McKay spent nearly two years in Russia, published a critical study on *Negroes in America*, numerous articles, and a grouping of poems, such as "Moscow," " Russian Cathedral" (first published in *Survey Graphic* in March 1, 1925, and retitled "St. Isaac's Church, Petrograd" in *the Selected Poems*), and "Petrograd: May Day 1923," which dates the beginning of McKay's journey to Berlin and then Paris, Marseilles, and Tangiers. It is a poem about the universalizing of desires, and the beauty and attraction of "cities" (in their personification and McKay's "diasporic" deconstructing of them). The first stanza returns the poet to the lyrical tradition of his childhood and "Sukee River." In its place is the Russian Neva, which "moves majestically on"

The sun-rays playing on her breast at seven,
From her blue bosom all winter's snow-slabs gone.
Now ripples curl where yesterday lay riven
Great silver oblongs chiselled by the band
Of Spring that bellies through Earth's happy womb,
To glad and flower the long, long pregnant land!
Where yestereven a veil of winter gloom
Shrouded the city's splendid face, - today
All life rejoices for the First of May.

The Nevsky glows ablaze with regal Red,
Symbolic of the triumph and the rule
Of the new Power now lifting high its head
Above the place where once a sceptered fool
Was mounted by the plunderers of men
To awe the victims while they schemed and robbed.
The marchers shout again. again. again!!!
The stones, where once the hearts of martyrs sobbed
Their blood, are sweet unto their feet today,
In celebration of the First of May.

Cities for McKay are "symbols of man's onward reach," where

Man drawing near to man in close commune,
And mighty cities mighty lessons teach
Of man's decay or progress, late or soon,
And many an iron-towered Babylon,
Beneath the quiet golden breath of Time
Has vanished like the snow under the sun,
Leaving no single mark in stone or rhyme
To flame the lifted heart of man today,
As Petrograd upon the First of May.

Oh many a thoughtful romance-seeking boy,
Slow-fingering the-leaves of ancient glory,
Is stirred to rapture by the tales of Troy,
And each invigorate, vein-tingling story
Of Egypt and of Athens and of Rome,
Where slaves long toiled for knights and kings to reap.
But in the years, the wondrous years to come,
The heart of youth in every land will leap
For Russia that first made national the day -
The embattled workers' day - The First of May.

McKay associates cities with pestilence and dogma.

Jerusalem is fading from men's mind,
And sacred cities holding men in thrall,
Are crumbling in the new thought of mankind-
The pagan day, the holy day for all!
And Petrograd, the proud triumphant city,
The gateway to the strange, awakening East,
Where warrior-workers wrestled without pity
Against the power of magnate, monarch, priest-
World Fort of Struggle, holding high today
The flaming standards of the First of May!

Jerusalem is a key word, and is a response to Alain Locke's assertion in his introduction to the new Negro that Harlem would be the new Jerusalem, or spiritual center for a renaissance. Instead Petrograd would be the "gateway to the strange."

The FBI last reported him to be in Russia in October 1923, and earlier that year provided a concise biography of the expatriate, citing his activities in communist circles as "very active." He was considered a close associate of Rose Pastor Stokes, who was code-

named "Sasha."¹⁸ (Stokes is another of those public intellectuals who straddled wealth and politics, much like the Jekylls and Sydney Olivier.) The report highlighted the fact that McKay was not a citizen of the United States, simply "a communist negro from Jamaica," who is classed by some as a poet. The report also chronicled McKay's involvement with the International Workers of the World, particular with a friend, "one Ryan" - possibly Albert Ryan, a member of the Western Federation of Miners - who was "engaged in selling forged passports in Germany." The FBI report. Insinuated that McKay was also "a confidential man" for Sylvia Pankhurst.

Before leaving for Europe, McKay lived near Union Square, in New York City at 25 East 14 Street, where much international activity and publishing was taking place, and remained in Russia as "president" of the Negro Section of the Executive Committee of the Third International, under whose aegis and supervision he wrote *Negroes in America*. On June 15, 1923, in a report from Charlotte, North Carolina, to John Edgar Hoover, the new director who carried on the Bureau's obsession with the Negro delegate, notified the Bureau that the "negro Radical Claude McKay was suspected of returning via the West Indies"; and that the customs officials for this southern port should contact the Bureau of the poet's possible "disembarkation." A memo on April 11 went out to customs officials in Wilmington, Delaware, the Postmaster and Colonel George H. Bunker, commander of the American Legion, informing them that the poet was attempting to enter the country by the West Indies and that he should receive "appropriate attention."

¹⁸ Wayne Cooper records McKay's departure from Russia to Hamburg, Germany, as May 1923 (*Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 193). Quarreling with Max Eastman over his proposed critique of *The Liberator* politics, McKay wrote mysteriously in May that "you may not be able to see me for some time. Uncertain as to time myself. But you can address me to Amer Express -

This all-ports frenzy began to subside with time. It was revived, however, when the Bureau received a tip that "secret messages" to the Negro people in America were being conveyed via McKay as part of a coded "open letter" that was published in a Russian newspaper. Burns wrote to W.L. Hurley of the State Department that Leon Trotsky's open letter to Claude McKay, published in *Izvestia*, was really official instructions for "the organization of the black race in the United States." Between January and March, the Bureau made frantic attempts to intercept McKay at any possible entry port - the West Coast (Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles), the Midwest (Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Canadian border towns), the Southeast (Delaware, North Carolina), the Northeast (Boston, New York, Baltimore), and the Gulf coast (Texas, Louisiana) - and assumed he would be traveling as a "sailor" - since none of the "Negro delegates" were believed to carry passports. In their pursuit, a mythic figure of a black radical began to take shape, and McKay became the lone "Negro delegate," without passport, who was carrying large sums of money and special instructions to the American Communist Party. The FBI's surveillance activities increased after a March 10 memorandum announced that he was in Copenhagen, on the verge of returning to the United States. Suddenly there were imaginary sightings of the Negro delegate in Cleveland, Ohio, in a memo dated March 19, 1923:

Negro Communist Delegate from America to the Third International is said to have return to this country over a month ago. He has been seen in Rand School

Berlin" (Qtd. in *The Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 90). Stokes had also been in correspondence with Crystal Eastman about the political activities of the Women's Peace Party, and may have met McKay then.

and at the Worker's Party headquarters, 799 Broadway, New York City, but nothing has been heard of him lately, and his present whereabouts are unknown.¹⁹

In following up the tip that a "Negro delegate" was in New York, Frank X. O'Donnell, acting special agent in charge in New York wrote that an informant spoke to Otto Huiswood, who was from Curacao and of Dutch Guiana extraction and the other Negro delegate to the Third International, arrived in New York on March 3 (and may have eluded the FBI's surveillance net.). Huiswood, for whatever reason, told the FBI that McKay had returned with him. McKay soon was transformed into a "Bolshevik agent" who was ordered to proceed to the Hague from Norway "with instructions to organize a colored Soviet" (in a memo from the director of the FBI to the Boston office on March 26, 1923). Even writers such as Eric Waldron began characterizing McKay as an agent.²⁰ But still there were no official sightings of McKay. Galveston, Texas, Bureau special agents had conferred with Immigration, Customs, Public health officials, as well as the sheriff's and police departments, should the "Radical Negro Representative" appear. Another memorandum of May 1, 1923, from the regional office at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, disseminated information to customs officials at the Canadian border town of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, instructing them to "to keep a sharp lookout for subject," should the poet attempt to enter Canada, who might use his British Commonwealth status as

¹⁹ The Rand School of Social Science in New York, according to a March 1918 notice in *The Crisis*, was a center for progressive politics, teaching "History, Economics, and Socialism in modernwise. It is unhampered by no traditions, but is radical in its honest search for truth. Above all it extends 'a genuine welcome to colored men and women'." (Vol. 15, Number 5, p. 218.) Later in the 1920s, the Rand School was suspected of links to international radicalism.

²⁰ "Waldron (in a widely reprinted article) said I had been invited to Russia by the Soviet government and the impression was that I had become a bolshevik agent," McKay wrote Cunard, on September 18, 1932. "A lie. I had to peddle autographed copies of poems, burn my friends and work as a fireman from N.Y. to Liverpool to get to Russia. And although the bolsheviks tried to make me represent the Negro race, I let them know that I was a free spirit, a poet although politically my sympathies were communist." (All letters from McKay to Cunard are in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin)

leverage, and circulated a photo of McKay. Two years later, with no “negro Delegate” in sight, the Department of Justice still wanted McKay for questioning, and those fears among Congressional leaders that McKay’s notorious 1919 poem “If We Must Die” conjured, continued to shape perceptions of the poet back in the States.

In January 1924, the FBI issued another extensive report on McKay which included a composite sketch of a radical Negro Delegate to the Third International who was carrying mysterious instructions for the organization of the black masses in the United States, and who himself was unable to be sighted. Sources finally confirmed that McKay – who was carrying a revolutionary packet that would ignite the black populace – remained in Russia and would be, instead, traveling to France. Tired of chasing a black phantom, the Justice and State departments turned their attentions to threats within the borders of the United States. Little did they realize that in a year Harlem would be magically transformed into an island of cultural interrogation, and that the New Negro would have its first racial encounter with American nationalist ideology. But McKay was not carrying instructions to the awaiting masses in the America. In fact he was uneasy in such a role. One of the letters that was intercepted by the FBI was addressed to Grace Campbell in which McKay complained of “the bummiest holiday in my life,” down on his luck with the grippe and money. “My life here is very unsatisfactory for a propagandist – cadging a meal off people who are not at all sympathetic to my social ideas,” he noted sarcastically of his European patrons. But Europe provided a climate in which McKay could write.²¹

²¹ All letters and memos are from the FBI files from 1922 to 1924, and reopened in 1940 at the request of J. Edgar Hoover, upon McKay’s application for citizenship. Freedom of Information Act No. 400,109/190-HQ-1137090.

Not only did McKay continue to develop his lyrical voice, he produced the bulk of his fiction as well as three groundbreaking works on the color and gender line, which were rejected or heavily edited by editors in the United States (and prompted McKay to seek out English publishers.) These works were "Savage Loving," "New Novel: Lafela," and "The Color Scheme."²² Even while McKay eased into his new identity of an expatriate, American race politics shadowed him. To survive, it dictated what he should write. He found, remarkably, that any work outside of a "New Negro" sensibility was prone to rejection or neglect. He attributed this, again, to provincial racial notions within African-American and mainstream thought, and also to an ingrained resistance to an intermingling of sex and race (that dance floor trope still loomed large for the poet). McKay's years of expatriation in Europe and North Africa (1922 to 1934) were his most productive, and he was at his peak intellectually, completing four books that did find publishers, even as a large body of poems and fiction remained unread. He considered Europe and the Continent "an infinitely more congenial place for the American Negro," than any place in the United States with the caveat: if you can "afford living there" (McKay to Cunard, April 30, 1932, Harry Ransom). While poetry reflected his life in New York, culminating with *Harlem Shadows* (1922), the bulk of his fiction was produced in the years 1928 to 1933 and was conceived in Marseilles and Tangiers. It included *Home to Harlem* (1928), his popular

²²"Color Scheme" was destroyed by McKay after it was rejected by American publishers. The main character, Ray, was an intellectual; in a later novel, *Home to Harlem*, he is uneducated (see Wayne Cooper's *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 236). He entrusted the manuscript to Arthur Schomburg, who was unable to place it. See *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile and Collector*, by Elinor Des Verney Sennett, p. 120. "New Novel: Lafela" is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; another copy, under the title "Romance in Marseilles," is in the Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library and originally titled "The Jungle and the Bottoms." The title was later changed to "New Novel: Romance in Marseilles." On October 26, 1941, McKay wrote Carl Van Vechten that he did not want "Lafela" in any published collection. "I especially want to have back *Banana Bottom* and the unfinished manuscript 'Lafela' which I have forgotten about." McKay had promised the typescript for his 1933 novel *Banana Bottom* to another collection.

best-selling novel, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1928), *Gingertown* (1932), and *Banana Bottom* (1933). The Tangiers peasants and landscape were crucial to McKay's re-imagining of the pastoral, which is found in *Banana Bottom* as well as the posthumous *My Green Hills of Jamaica*.²³ McKay's interactions with this trans-Atlantic maritime culture in Marseilles as well as an Arab peasantry in Tangiers worked at reshaping a diasporic esthetic – the hybridized language that united the topos of Harlem with Morocco, Tangier, France; mulatto, rural, urban. Much like the “bent” English tradition that McKay developed in 1920 with Ogden and the Cambridge intellectuals, and earlier with Jekyll, which merged an Island sensibility with artistic representations of Empire, McKay's first attempts at fiction globalized the local. It is not serendipitous that Marseilles was the inspiration for much of McKay's fiction – this “little port, vast and not too healthy in body, international in mind, and unconfined of soul,” as one author observed in 1923.

But even its body is a fascinating conglomeration and not a welded mixture. And so light and free and untrammelled is its spirit that one may at first hug the illusion that it does not exist that its flutterings may have been buried for ever beneath wealth, squalor, heat disease, pleasure, toil, crime, commerce, and the inevitable clash of so many nationalities within its confines, and the vicissitudes that the city has faced in its struggle through the centuries. But no – Marseilles presents in its flashing facets, the spectacle of a city in which these things co-exist, flourish fully and naturally with a light freedom and naiveté that is as undoubted as it is indefinable and indescribable, and yet to none of which its essence is surrendered.

²³The final title became *My Green Hills of Jamaica and Five Jamaican Short Stories*, and was published in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1979. Wayne Cooper in *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, lists it as appearing in 1981; the copyright for the book is listed as 1979.

Consequently McKay began to see himself as representative of a diasporic population of transnationals (no longer merely internationalists) who reflected shifting world populations. – for within the “gates of the cosmopolis of Marseilles” none was a stranger.²⁴ Whereas Waldo Frank, Alain Locke, Walter and Gertrude Jekyll, and John Ruskin made note of migrations from the country to the city, McKay embodied a second migration, which Frederick Douglass chronicled, a movement of migrant labor throughout the world, into large urban areas. These urban “nodes,” as Ogden characterized them, along migratory routes were not quite the revived folkloric centers of culture discussed in the pages of *The Garden* or the *Survey Graphic* – or even the Harlem of Alain Locke’s imagination. Cut off from the provincialism or the essential culture of one’s homeland, these meeting places existed as an interstitial space – unpacked of national customs, a place of intense questioning and an incubator of taboos. McKay felt at home in such an environment – since all taboos for McKay were to be confronted or overcome. But what united the inhabitants of such a world was their desire to find an imagined homeland. To exist in such a space – white, black, brown – was to think diasporically.

IN PARIS, MCKAY WAS BECOMING QUITE A CELEBRITY for a sensibility that would later coalesce as “negritude.” This notoriety was in sharp contrast to the perception of him by Americans as “propagandist” for a black Soviet or as a diplomat for the New Negro

²⁴ “The World Over: The Soul of Marseilles,” by L.A. Pavey, *Time and Tide* (August 8, 1923), p. 786.

esthetic. He met with Paulette Nardal, who included poems in the premier issue of *La Revue du Monde Noir*, along with Aimé Césaire and works by Léopold Sédar Senghor. In Paris, McKay also found a publisher, Édition Rieder, for his novel *Banjo*, which was published in French in 1931, and translated into French by Ida Treat and Paul Vaillant-Couturier with a preface by Georges Friedmann (after he was told by American editors that the Negro was out of vogue). "The French translation of *Banjo* exerted a profound influence on Afro-French and Caribbean-French blacks in Paris," Robert P. Smith Jr. has noted.²⁵ *Banjo*'s diasporic sensibility built upon this anti-modernist folk esthetic that was cultivated in McKay's apprenticeship with Jekyll and Fabian socialism. It "typically understood the cultural crisis as a problem of over-civilization for which the quest for authenticity of experience was held out as an antidote."²⁶ McKay especially influenced students from Martinique and other colonial enclaves – those new students whom Ogden wanted to catch within his network of academic "nodes" as well. They all gravitated around *La Revue*.

The students themselves were members of Martinique's black bourgeoisie, and all were mulattos except one, Étienne Lérot. Some of them had been associated with *La Revue du Monde Noir* . . . after reading McKay's criticism of the Negro middle class in the United States they separated from the intellectuals of *La Revue du Monde Noir*, whom they then considered as "petits bourgeois crepus." (Smith 53).

But McKay's celebration of this new esthetic, which called for a mass folk culture beyond a race-oriented primitivism, in effect, stigmatized him among more nationalist scholars and politically savvy critics. But it was a double-edge stigma. Not only was he excluded from participating in mainstream modernist movement for being black and international, but he was further ostracized by the class prejudices of intellectuals such as Du Bois and Locke,

²⁵ Robert P. Smith, "Rereading *Banjo*: Claude McKay and the French Connection," *CLA Journal* 30:1 (September 1986), p. 52.

who were arguing for racial uniformity. But in Europe, away from those powerful intellectuals in America, McKay was able to untangle the New Negro aura to explore the underbelly of a global temperament – multicolored and dimensional – in the making. While *Home to Harlem* is McKay's critique race and class prejudices in the U.S., *Banjo* explores international color and texture that is motivated by a desire to return to some kind of originary balance (reminiscent of Salman Rushdie's more cent conception of a postcolonial "imaginary homeland"). For McKay, as an internationalist, it was a place beyond crude fabrications of sex and race; nationalized borders of war and hate.

This sojourn has been viewed, until recently, as an unpoetic time in McKay's life, when he put aside verse for a more marketable prose. That, too, was in keeping with his notion of a self-sufficient black public intellectual. McKay, by all costs, wanted too be paid for his writing, and live the good life of a litterateur – in the mode of his mentor Walter Jekyll, with however none of the luxuries and privileges. *Harlem Shadows*, published in 1922 in New York, was McKay's signature poetic text in America (*Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems*, published two years earlier in London, was difficult to get, and soon went out of print). He was 32 years old when *Harlem Shadows* appeared. For someone as restless as McKay, who pushed at the boundaries of convention, it must have been painful to have your powerful poetry hang without any other collection to follow. He always considered himself a poet, and that spirit enveloped him with a passion for life. As early 1912, in his preface to *Constab Poem*, he was aware of this.

²⁶ Adolph Reed, *W.E.B. DuBois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford U P, 1997)

We blacks are all somewhat impatient of discipline and to the natural impatience of my race there was added in my particular case, a peculiar sensitiveness which make certain forms of discipline irksome, and a fierce hatred of injustice. Not that I ever openly rebelled, but the rebellion was in my heart, and it was fomented by the inevitable rubs of daily life – trifles to most of my comrades, but to me calamities and tragedies. To relieve my feelings, I wrote poems, and into them I poured my heart into its various moods.

Wayne Cooper has argued that McKay's poetic quality diminished from 1922 on – a date that he affixed, interestingly, to his leaving New York. One wonders what assumptions Cooper made in establishing that date. Were they based in part on the *parameters* of engagement for a radical black poet? Is there a subtext to Cooper's prejudice toward writers who are not compatible with American race discourse? In truth, few poems from this period are in print, particularly those written while McKay traveled in North Africa, and he continued to write sonnets as a English tradition – some strange and beautiful, others bitter and ironic – up until the very end of his life in 1948, which he completed a tightly worked "Cycle Poems, that was critical of the closed-ranked WWII years. (A time when very few critical voices were heard, black or white.) By this time, after his apprenticeship with Jekyll and Ogden, McKay had a rich poetic voice, and his poetic observations as he traveled through France, Spain and Morocco are uniquely diasporic. Precisely because there was no pressure to produce "New Negro" poems, I believe, afforded him the freedom to become (what Shaw hinted at in his exchanges with the poet) a poorer version of an English poet for want of an empire. After publicly renouncing poetry, McKay was able to focus his concerns on his loves and passions (and taboos) – something he was unable to do in New York, publishing in radical little magazines that expected consistent writing on race relations and uplift. While in France in the 1920s he conceded to Louise Bryant, the wife of John Reed, that his lyric poetry "was an intense reflection of personal emotion" (*A Long*

Way from Home 254). Although he lived the poetic spirit, the necessity of earning a living as a writer intruded on this fantasy (for a black writer, at least). Another letter to Bryant on June 2, 1926, remarked that: "a friend had urged me to do some stories and get in on the Negro vogue ~ so I dropped the writing of poetry altogether." Or, I imagine, until the bogue was over. Home to Harlem definitely cashed in on the vogue but offered much more than Harlem's New Negroes bargained for. (One can, for instance, read *Home to Harlem* against *Nigger Heaven*, the popular book by Carl Van Vechten, which excluded the working classes of Harlem. It was a remarkable move on McKay's part to devote an entire book to the *workers* of Harlem. Up to this point, there were depictions of Harlem but they were always of the black and white middle class.)

Despite what he wrote to Bryant and, later, Nancy Cunard, poetry was integral to McKay's identity. He understood later, when he lived in Tangiers, and was pleased to see it as a vital part of daily life - something unheard of in Europe and America. Another mention of these mysterious sonnets came from Hughes in a letter to McKay on July 23, 1943: "I hope you still have those swell poems, sonnets I think," Hughes inquired, "that you once sent Locke from Europe and which I never saw." One of those sonnets might have been "Honeymoon,"

Sweet, be your body a rare figured rug
Upon which I may lay myself full length,
And drink your warm breath as a potent drug,
To make me amorous and increase my strength.
Let me be drunken with your passion's wine,
Our days are foodless, yet I know no pains;
Your subtle presence is an anodyne
That deadens native hungers in my veins.
My heart beats in a wanton mood to move
With the strange rhythm of your spirit's motion.
My soul's a laden boat propelled by love,

And these uplifted days a heaving ocean
Thereon we drift foam-sprinkled, shot with zest,
Desiring not to reach a port of rest.

"Honeymoon" is a tight reworking of the Shakespearean sonnet tradition, particularly in its use of Elizabethan metaphors for love – such as "a port of rest" – or passion – as in "a heaving ocean." One sees a poet who has studied *The Sonnets* as a literary roadmap. His love might be a woman or a man – or no one at all, but an object (as critics have been led to believe in Shakespeare's sonnets). It can also, conceivably for McKay, be the love of cities and their cultures. Yet there is an undercurrent (as in all of McKay's poems) of diasporic restlessness, of Trans-Atlantic migrations, which move from native hungers or cosmopolitan desires across "heaving oceans." Much "Like a Strong Tree" (as the poet travels "against a thousand storms") love becomes a foundation – a "rug" of nurturing water and alluring shores – upon which this diasporic movement sustains itself.

In October 1923, after a summer in Berlin, McKay left for Paris. He wrote to Arturo Schomburg that he was driven out of Berlin by high prices, the disintegration of political order, and intolerance – particularly, he emphasized, the antagonism of "the German Right against their moderate and radical opponents." In that context, we should read "The Desolate City." He characterized the poem as "largely symbolic: a composite and evocation of the clinic, my environment, condition and mood," in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*. McKay's muscle and bones are the girders of this architecture, reflecting the grandeur of modernity, which is now, in the post-WWI years, "pestilential" and "Glutted with baffled hopes." The poem begins:

My spirit is a pestilential city,
With misery triumphant everywhere,
Glutted with baffled hopes and human pity.

Strange agonies make quiet lodgment there:
Its sewers, bursting, ooze up from below
And spread their loathsome substance through its lanes,
Flooding all areas with their evil flow
And blocking all the motions of its veins:
Its life is sealed to love or hope or pity,
My spirit is a pestilential city.

The poem expresses containment - *blocked* motions, *sealed* lives, *quiet* lodgments - and describes the beginning of McKay's exile, in which his soul has become imprisoned and is the prisoner (recalling Byron's *Harold Childe* and "the shattered links of the world's broken chains" he wears, as he treads lightly upon "Empire's dust"; there are also Renaissance associations of love to imprisonment). McKay also explores an international feminist temperament as well, where a feminist spirit, or "soul," struggles against the nationalized architecture of the masculine city. High "above its walls" hang an empty tower and broken minaret (the broken remnants, one wonders, of vanquished cultures of imperialist ways) - a shadow landscape to this modernist representation. It is a weight - this mood of oppression that hangs above the city - towering over Berlin, Paris and all of Europe. Leaves are "shriveled silver," and are parched with decay, and have yellowed (yellow connoting peril - the threat from the Orient, but here it is layered with an exoticized tropical panic). McKay also shows us a view of the city as organic - the poet's attempt to balance the urban with ecological sensitivity (remember that McKay was influenced by Olivier's notion of land and was made aware at an early age of deforestation) - and in regeneration.

Above its walls the air is heavy-wet,
Brooding in fever mood and hanging thick
Round empty tower and broken minaret,
Settling upon the tree tops stricken sick
And withered under its contagious breath.
Their leaves are shriveled silver, parched decay,
Like wilting creepers trailing underneath

The chalky yellow of a tropic way.
Round crumbling tower and leaning minaret,
The air hangs fever-filled and heavy-wet.

And all its many fountains no more spurt;
Within the dammed-up tubes they tide and foam,
Around the drifted sludge and silted dirt,
And weep against the soft and liquid loam.
And so the city's ways are washed no more,
All is neglected and decayed within,

"Clean waters beat against its high-walled shore," but cannot enter the city. It has become closed to ideas and transaction - even nature cannot find a way in - and is strangled by its own "silted dirt." Much as Locke Harlem is removed from the political realities in America, this city, too, has cut off avenues of discourse, and is strangled by its own waste and excess. But more disturbing has polluted its soil and land, and shriveled "Beneath the jet-gloom of the mounting rocks."

Beneath the ebon gloom of mounting rocks
The little pools lie poisonously still,
And birds come to the edge in forlorn flocks,
And utter sudden, plaintive notes and shrill,
Pecking at strangely gray-green substances;
But never do they dip their bills and drink.
They twitter, sad beneath the mournful trees,
And fretfully flit to and from the brink,
In little gray-brown, green-and-purple flocks,
Beneath the jet-gloom of the mounting rocks.

And green-eyed moths of curious design,
With gold-black wings and rarely silver-dotted,
On nests of flowers among those rocks recline,
Bold, burning blossoms, strangely leopard-spotted,
But breathing deadly poison from their lips.
And every lovely moth that wanders by,
And from the blossoms fatal nectar sips,
Is doomed to drooping stupor, there to die;
All green-eyed moths of curious design
That on the fiercely-burning blooms recline.

Oh cold as death is all the loveliness,
That breathes out of the strangeness of the scene,

And sickening like a skeleton's caress,
Of clammy clinging fingers, long and lean.
Above it float a host of yellow flies,
Circling in changeless motion in their place,
That came down snow-thick from the freighted skies,
Swarming across the gluey door of space:
Oh cold as death is all the loveliness,
And sickening like a skeleton's caress.

By the poem's end, we have moved with McKay to a childhood place of cultural wholeness (much like the splicing of the Neva/Sukee rivers in "Petrograd: May Day 1923"). Hybridity and the diaspora - the horticultural grafting and biological synthesis - are implied. Here, dispersal is associated with "the fall of pestilential showers," but the direction of that dispersal is never fully realized. Quite possibly that is McKay's point: Diaspora never finds complete fulfillment; it is always on the move, evolving and rupturing as it collides with other cultures.

There was a time when, happy with the birds,
The little children clapped their hands and laughed;
And midst the clouds the glad winds heard their words
And blew down all the merry ways to waft
The music through the scented fields of flowers.
Oh sweet were children's voices in those days,
Before the fall of pestilential showers,
That drove them forth far from the city's ways:
Now never, nevermore their silver words
Will mingle with the golden of the birds.

The poem ends on a nostalgic note reminiscent of Gertrude Jekyll and her descriptions of the vanished rural community:

Gone, gone forever the familiar form
To which the city once so dearly clung,
Blown worlds beyond by the destroying storms
And lost away like lovely songs unsung.
Yet life still lingers, questioningly strange,
Timid and quivering, naked and alone,
Against the cycle of disruptive change,
Though all the fond familiar forms are gone,

Forever gone, the fond familiar forms;
Blown worlds beyond by the destroying storms.²⁷

It is a gloomy assessment, quite in contrast to, for instance, "New Forces," written only four years earlier (one wonders if McKay saw the unraveling of Europe and WWII on the horizon?) Nature and this grafting of a childhood innocence becomes tempered and sharpened in these later poems, which travel back toward empire's soul, while re-imagining form and theme. While McKay produced fiction that was tempered in race analysis, his poetry reflected the implication of this diasporic complexion onto European modernity. It is the gaze of the detached cultural observer that we found in McKay's "Negro Dancers" or other poems – anonymous and analytical. But there is also a recuperative effort going on here, a patching of soul and balance – the trademark of this diasporic sensibility. In "Desolate City," McKay reconfigures modern urbanity as a place of spiritual transaction, much as Frederick Douglass viewed the city.

McKay's response to the cultural stagnation he found throughout Europe is particularly evident in "Berlin," which he wrote shortly before "The Desolate City." While the FBI thought McKay was conspiring with I.W.W. counterfeiterers, he instead was waxing lyrical about Berlin, reflecting on unacknowledged tensions that would culminate in World War II. And "Rococo" here has a special meaning for race leaders in America, since McKay used it to characterize Locke and others as "inauthentic."

²⁷In the posthumous 1953 *Selected*, the word "city" in the second line was added; "spirit" appears in the unpublished "New Poems" as well as in the 1927 Cullen anthology. Eastman considered "The Desolate City" McKay's finest work and may have been involved in its later editing. Another poem from that time period was also altered. "International Soul" was changed to "International Spirit." If McKay considered the latter change important, then Eastman's intrusion on "The Desolate City" mars the sense of the poem.

There was a haughty spirit and impressive
In that deliberate granite pile on pile,
Rising so arrogant and challenging,
Imposing by sheer strength and heavy line
A stony will in ruthless Nordic style.
And of that massive grandeur everything
Created seemed and destined by design
To foster iron virtues and aggressive.

I sensed a brutal might and intrepid,
A Frankenstein in which the dynamo
Of Europe throbbed with sinister intent.
Yet strangely from the common ebb and flow
Issued a surge of sickening sentiment.
Around that force rococo, insipid.

It is during his stay in Russia that McKay became ill, and the Berlin-Paris poems become a metaphoric journey for McKay: in traveling from Berlin and Paris to Nice and Marseilles, the poet-novelist recovers his cultural equilibrium, and in so doing reemerges with a clean cultural vision (this rebirth is particularly significant for McKay; each destination ends in conflict and resolution, however). McKay deconstructs Paris (a place believed to be of singular importance to African Americans during this time, according to Michel Fabre). Yet McKay casts a critical gaze over the Parisian landscape, and locates a chilling rigidity in "Paris" He spends as little time there as needed to find a publisher and meet with New York New Negroes, such as Locke, and publishers. "Paris," he writes, "has built a world in its image,"

of brazen lust and wild licentiousness,
Salomé dancers nude of veils and fans,
Interpreting the thousand ways of love;
And having visioned that will nothing less
Than pagan paradise of courtesans
And cavaliers along the lovely grove,
Wonderful like all things seen through a mirage.

Paris has become a mirage – a sight one only when thirsty for culture. Yet Paris is also
“cynical and serpent-wise”

Uncoils her body to its sinuous length,
And charming those who never see below

Yet there is panic and anxiety beyond this image. Few know – or care to know

The depths profound upon which rests her strength
Nor understand the fascinating glow,
The wisdom fathomed in her gleaming eyes.

In the second movement of the poem, McKay admits that he has never been moved by the
surface allures of this Paris.

Paris has never stormed my stubborn heart
And rushed like champagne sparkling to my head,
Whirling me round and round till I am spent
To fill down like a drunkard at her feet.
Because it is a city more like bread
Than wine and meat as solid nourishment,
To build a Frenchman make his mind complete
And fit him for his civilizing part.

As a diasporic traveler, McKay finds Paris a laboratory – a place where one observes and
notes.

More than all cities Paris is a school,
With lessons priced that every one can pay,
But education non-compulsory,
With teachers at your service day by day:
Like London and New York no need to harry,
Yet he who does not learn was born a fool.

While in Paris, McKay had been recovering from syphilis, but soon contracted influenza
while modeling nude at Nina Hammets' studio. He also became severely depressed
(possibly a result of a syphilitic attack), and was assigned to a dingy Paris hospital ward. In
“Mummy,” published as “Skeleton” in *The Crisis* in 1924 along with others on the theme of

"Miasma," a grouping of poems mentioned by the author that are unaccounted for. In "Mummy," which last the sense of the body entombed (the feeling evoked by Douglass in being shackled to a geography), the poet describes the disintegration of the his body as a metaphor for the rise of fascism and the loss of idealism in a fading internationalism

All of his flesh has fallen away
Between the skin and the bone,
Muscle and blood dried up in decay,
Leaving the skeleton.

And out of that skeleton has leaked
The last reserve of marrow,
The sappers unseen their vengeance have wreaked,
There is nothing left to harrow.

McKay describes feelings of alienation amid the high culture of Paris in disease and blackness merge. In "Patient," he begins

The key was turned and opened wide the door,
And he was bidden and compelled to enter,
His spirit like lead within his body sore.
He passed within and to the awful center,
And found the monarch grim upon his throne,
Around which Strength was broken in his place,
And Beauty shrunk to a hollow moan,
And Love unmasked an obscene ugly face.

The poet then reflects on his condition.

If he had lived in high Renaissance days,
He might have moved a Michel Angelo;
And Raphael might have put angelic rays
Around his golden head and made it glow
With loveliness eternal like a star:
His figure would adorn an altar place,
And women feeling beauty at the bar,
Kneeling to God would dwell upon his face.

But in this Age of Hypocrites afraid
And smug of rank respectabilities,
He chose the dubious freedom of the shade,
The way of easy opportunities,

And mindless following a whim perverse,
Is victim of Desire's scourge and curse.

The poem ends sarcastically – almost narcissistically – with the poem musing on his craft and place in history. Yet, he returns, symbolically, not to the “sepulchral coldness” of London or other monuments to greatness, but to the forces of the earth

Oh how Death tore and harried at his heart!
And bow in fear and fever fought to back,
Trying to walk, to stand, to sit, to talk,
Until he was laid flat upon the rack.

One week before I watched him take the air
But faltering he could not make the way,
His sinews were too macilent to fight
Tubercular and chronic gonorrhea.

He turned away his tender rolling eyes,
Melting us speechless as our own they met,
When softly he called for, but could not smoke,
Coughing incessantly, a cigarette.

Each woeful moan went through our tortured nerves,
Our hearts puncturing a spike a wheel,
Wounding us helpless there who nought could do,
To conjure Fate nor stop his certain seal.

The strong drugs even brought him no relief,
We marvelled that his frame could bear the strain!
Stretched taut and quivering upon the cot,
It seemed a special instrument of pain.

Before the noon he gave the last sad moan,
Succumbing to the fierce assaulting germs,
That harshly finished their foul work to cast
His empty carcass to the waiting worms.

The same gaze, again, but upon a diseased cultural body. When McKay entered the hospital again in 1927, however, for a cure treatment in Berlin. He was a “chastened spirit” who had renewed hope,

Like golden drops of rain from thick-thatched eaves,
That fall into uplifted tania leaves ²⁸

This "mysterious illness" shadowed McKay through most of Europe, and colored his impressions. He received treatment and a cure only with a sizable advance on Banana and royalties on *Home to Harlem*. Thus, metaphorically, Morocco becomes his island of safety from disease and political imbalance.

Paris, thus far, doesn't seem all that appealing, and he aptly reflects this mood in "The Desolate City" (which is part of the unpublished "The Clinic"), a poem that describes a "pestilent" city bloated with the weight of modernity. "The Void" and "Skelton" appeared in *The Crisis* in June 1925, while "In the Hospital" appeared in a March 1926 issue.

In "The Years Between," the poet explains that "Many passions agitate my head," particularly the "sea-change," which evokes the old imperialist slave trade routes. But McKay reveals deeper anxieties, in which

Those moments of my flight with golden wings
Attached a monument to my feet of clay.

Unlike McKay's other references to feet, these have the feel of European culture, like a monument to his "foundation of experience." McKay's gaze while in Europe is fixed upon these "monuments" – those representations of whiteness and imperial power. He also is seeking the "soul" of those monuments, with the hope that there might be, within them, a new "spirit." Yet it is a strange monument: attached to one's "feet of clay." Is this an asset

²⁸ McKay, "In the Hospital" *The Crisis* 33:4 (February 1927), p. 202.

or a hindrance? The poem – like many of McKay's pieces – concludes on a note of racial and cultural anxiety.

The European poems (there are some 42 poems, which I believe were written or revised while traveled and lived in Germany, France, and Morocco, as part of a collection titled "New Poems" in the Beinecke Collection) were produced at a time when McKay was virtually isolated from American black intellectuals – more or less by choice – and publishing houses were shunning racially sensitive issues. And throughout this period, he was shadowed by an even more ominous threat – continued surveillance by the United States and English authorities. Thus, many of those poems evoke a landscape of terror, fear, and isolation, and explore sites of culture and identity, from the vantage of an international nonwhite.²⁹ "The Dream" is one such poem that, again, splices political-racial fears against childhood images, such as found in the 1912 "A Dream," which become a trope for identity and fullness. The later "Dream," however, is enacted upon a tormented body – one that has been autopsied incorrectly.

They are not bountiful now as before
More often they are horrible nightmares,
So many have been murdered in the roar
And bloody terror of the marring years.

Oh for the higher, the inner light,
To see and hold a while a little one,
They tortured me, flitting across my night,
I hear, I see, I touch them! They are gone!

Oh I have even drugged myself to dream
Of dear dead things, trembling with hope to capture

²⁹Phyllis Martin Lang places most of "New Poems" and "The Cycle" as post-1934, written after McKay arrived in America. She listed 120 unpublished poems. She says that these poems "of the last fourteen years" – from 1934 to 1948 – "are strongly racial, frequently anti-Communist, largely urban and non-sexual" (Lang 196).

The sunlight ripples laughing on the stream
That bathed my boyhood days in foamy rapture.³⁰

The poem completes a pastoral cycle, which begins in Jamaica and moves through Harlem and into Europe, toward the center of Empire and terror. McKay, the international, writes of the many "murdered in the roar" – the comrades, the dreams, and, obliquely, as a black writer, the *poems*. Like a painter, McKay uniquely provides broad, exotic strokes of European cities and landmarks; and while in Barcelona, Casablanca, and Tangiers, he touched on the subtle beauties and sensuousness of cultures. His poems add insights not seen in works of this era, since much of the travel writing was as white voyeur, whether as arrogant adventurer into the *Heart of Darkness* or in quest of the noble savage, *a la* Kipling. McKay reverses the gaze, much like "The Harlem Dancer," in which the black poet is disengaged from the exoticized image, but yet repositions it for white consumption. McKay in Europe re-exoticizes Europe, and predictably is rejected for his exoticization, revealing the double standard of modernism and its relationship with primitivist temperaments. McKay was one of the first ex-colonials to "write back," to interpret through his poetry the relationship of European modernity, architecture, and culture; to explore deeper connections of blackness beyond the pale of the New Negro.

³⁰ In the "New Poems" manuscript, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

MCKAY'S FEELINGS AT THE TIME HE LEFT THE UNITED STATES AND ITS "CULTURED HELL" can be summed up in the poem "America," which was included in *Harlem Shadows* in 1922. Interestingly, it can also be read as a positive poem that expressed McKay's love of the United States. As with most poems, this one must be read as starkly competing sensibilities and desires.

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!

Both sustained and nurtured, the colonial poet learns to love this "cultured hell." Soon his mentor's vigor supplants his own, and "flows like tides into my blood." But their relationship soon becomes sexual, and it is the "bigness" of her that arouses his hatred. McKay's poem mirrors the colonial's predicament: It is a sadomasochistic relationship that soon gives way to an epiphany: The poet sees into the future and recognizes the might of America as a major force in international politics, and this love affair brutstles. But entry into the poem's enigma and diasporic meaning begins with "rebel" and "hood." Here, again, McKay builds on the trope of double consciousness and the veil.

Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a hood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Inversely, America's vastness only increases McKay's invisibility, or more precisely his anonymity. As such, he can stand before a "king" in state – a double meaning here: the king is blinded by the office's rituals, or he is in a state of solemn bereavement and, consequently, unaware of the radical's presence. The ending has quixotic twist, reminiscent of Shakespeare's love sonnets. Again, McKay evokes Shelley's "Ozymandias," the "king of kings" who withers "boundless and bare" and whose "granite wonders" sink like "priceless treasures" in the sand. Unlike the American literary tradition of cataloging that began with Whitman, McKay blurs materiality and culture – the antithesis of what popular modernist writers attempted. While Hart Crane elevated the "Brooklyn Bridge" to almost mythic stature (much like the relationship of the Twin Towers to an invincible mythic American spirit), McKay works at an opposing, late Romantic tradition that contrasted with W.C. Williams and his "no ideas but in things" or Pound's imagism, which singularly focused upon the visual abstraction. McKay's poetic gaze dissolves the line between representation and humanity. America's "bigness" did indeed sweep McKay under "like a hood" – the freedom of the veil, but also the anonymity of violence, as with the horrifying randomness of the Ku Klux Klan. And it is this anonymity that confuses fact with fiction, creating multiple identities.

In the summer of 1926, he reported to Louise Bryant, his generous benefactor who agreed to finance his "escape" to Marseilles, that this port city would be his "last and cheapest stand" in Europe. Bryant met McKay through *The Liberator* when John Reed, who she married, was reporting from Moscow on the early years of the revolution. Bryant had an interest in fiction, and she edited Reed's work. She offered suggestions and advice to

McKay, was enthusiastic about his turn to fiction, and encouraged his move away from places like Paris and London. "Go home to Harlem or back to Africa but don't stay in Paris," she wrote (*A Long Way* 325). Paris, as the poet noted, was merely an "image," created by world tastes; and like Harlem, it too was artificial. Paris existed as a "mirage." He complained to his agent, William Aspenwall Bradley, on July 5, 1929: "I can't work in Paris. I don't know why . . . I feel depressed as I approached the machine and want to run away from it and my thoughts." Paris was synonymous with the modernist "machine" - repetition, conformity, dullness. Marseilles, very much like the early twentieth-century Harlem, conjured an international racial and cultural topos, even though it was the shabby terminus for migrations of motley mixes throughout the world. Its significance as a diasporic nexus reached beyond the twentieth century and Harlem, and is not coincidental that Dumas used Marseilles as a location for one of his novels. Douglass, as well, made particular note of the southern rim of European influence in his travels through Europe. "A few hours before reaching Marseilles," noted Douglass in his "My Foreign Travels Abroad" lecture of December 15, 1888,

we were in mid-winter, but now we were all at once greeted with the lemon and the orange, the olive and the oleander, all flourishing under the open sky. The transition was so sudden and the contrast so complete, as to seem more like magic than reality.

Douglass made particular note of racial and cultural contrasts:

No only was the climate different, but the people seemed different. A certain blending of the Orient with the Occident was plainly visible."

Marseilles' geography and rim culture contrast with Harlem's cocoonlike reality, within a publishing and entertainment world capital. And when Alain Locke or DuBois traveled to

Europe, it was usually Paris that figured prominently. Marseilles was hardly on the modernist tour guide, although McKay a point to escort New Yorkers around the seedier parts. For McKay - while he admitted that the climate and atmosphere helped him to complete *Home to Harlem* - the city also provided anonymity; affording him the economic and, more importantly, sexual freedom he needed as an artist. Whereas his body was literally on display in Paris, where he nearly died of exposure as an artist's model, Marseilles' gaze was more upon "ships and crews."

This "sinister" Marseilles, the industrial port city that was home to McKay's Harlem esthetic, would help to fill in the racial blanks and unanswered echoes (what the Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat has called "*maroonage*") about the conditions of contemporary blacks, who were sidestepped in places like Harlem, Paris, and Moscow. Marseilles, for McKay, built on his passion of internationalism, and was an important angle to an ongoing discourse that intellectuals such as Alain Locke - whom McKay described as a "black rococo" - and editor, writer and NAACP founder James Weldon Johnson were carving out. In contrast to Locke, who solidified his New Negro philosophy with a visit to Paris in the summer of 1924, McKay moved temperamentally to "motley Marseilles," which celebrated diversity and difference. When Leopold Senghor advised McKay to "Tell the truth," it was of these global outcasts of which he spoke. But Michel Fabre and others have characterized the city as a drab backwater port, uninspiring even for McKay.

Had McKay not been so deeply attracted to life in Marseilles, the city would certainly have provided less literary inspiration. More than a backdrop or locale, it became an almost mythical element, largely because of its role as the gateway to Africa and of the international atmosphere of its harbor. (109)

In Marseilles, McKay's skills at navigating empire brought him to a comfortable accommodation without the need for academic or expatriate-bohemian routes.

Fabre correctly points out that McKay, both by living in Marseilles and using it as a backdrop in *Banjo* and *Romance in Marseilles*, cast it as "an international city, the best-loved harbor in Europe. In so doing, he relegated Paris to a symbol of the artificial, dissolute, hectic existence in big Western cities, a place of vanity and spiritual desolation" (111). McKay himself saw the city as a refuge, "as if all the derelicts of the seas had drifted up there to sprawl out the days in the sun" (*Banjo* 56) in contrast to the "gray fields" of Paris; it is a balm of heady sugar cane liquor rather than simply an exotic flower that was "unique and natural." And when he *must* visit Paris – as he does periodically to meet with his agent – he can't wait to flee and return to his sinister Marseilles.

Marseilles also interests McKay as poetic geography, an image of some place *between* cultures. It also satisfies his fascination with the margins – that is, the edges of proper white and black society. Fabre notes that Marseilles had the reputation as the "unchallenged Babylon" of Europe, and the less formal atmosphere of this Babylonian cultural crossroads is what appealed, possibly, to McKay's aesthetic and sexuality sensibilities. (Yet if that is true, why one must ask didn't the margins of Paris perk his interests as well?) For McKay, Marseilles is less of a "mythical element," I believe, than a realistic (read: "political") threat to European stability (much as his mentor Walter Jekyll viewed Jamaica as a threat to Englishness.). He writes in *Banjo*

the town seemed to proclaim to the world that the grandest thing about modern life was that it was bawdy. . . . Here . . . was the veritable romance of Europe." (68-69).

McKay, in this work and *Romance in Marseilles*, adds an ironic postcolonial twist to the conventional – and modernist – romance frame.

As McKay was packing to leave Nice for Marseilles, the Harlem Renaissance – the “New Negro” movement, as Alain Locke preferred – was taking New York by storm. McKay’s “Negro stories,” which would become *Home to Harlem*, the groundbreaking Renaissance novel, are fine-tuned and polished in the southern rim culture of Marseilles. For McKay “It was a relief to get to Marseilles, to live in a great gang of black and brown humanity” (*A Long* 277). It was a place of gritty realism and honesty in which black, brown, and white were “not exotic, creating curiosity or hostility, but unique and natural” (*A Long* 277). While the Harlem caravan courted the Paris elite, Leopold Senghor inspired McKay to write his next novel, *Banjo*, an intellectual exploration of African dislocation. When Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire founded the *L’Etudiant Noir* in 1935 they used “l’esprit de Brousse (“the spirit of the bush”) as their editorial aim, and that philosophy resonated in *Banjo*’s “fundamental racial values” (qtd. in Fabre, 156). Marseilles was a geographic tonic, if not a political re-awakening, uniting the Oliviers, Eastmans, Panmkhursts with the Senghors and Césaires of the world. Marseilles was “good for me,” McKay concluded. It was

a straight dry heat that was good for the skin. Nothing of the sticky, uncomfortable and oppressive heat of New York and London and Paris. One gets into the warmth of Marseilles as a West Indian boy burrows into a heap of dried sugar cane after the liquor has been pressed out, and feels sweet and comfortable lying down deep in it. (*A Long* 218)

BUT MCKAY EVENTUALLY SUCCUMBED TO THE ENTICEMENTS OF HARLEM GLORY.³¹ After publishing four books while living in Europe, his career spiraled out of control; his life and persona did, indeed, become history. Yet McKay had few options as "the Menace" intruded upon his idyllic world. To Nancy Cunard (August 31, 1932), he reported that his "little house" in Tangiers was ransacked and his French "Carte d'Identite" and British passport were taken, along with 300 francs. McKay conjectured that "so was so harassed by the police" that he became convinced "their objective was to deprive me of my passport." McKay began "seriously considering leaving here for any old place." And Max Eastman warned on October 19, 1930: "I think you would find it hard to adjust yourself to life over here. If you are anything like me, it would make you sad to come back after so long an absence."

On his return in 1934, the author, like Lafela, is barely able to shuffle along, and is unable to tango to the rhythms of American music anymore. With the deadly serious ideological lines demarcated at the outbreak of WWII - a climate in which internationalism became re-created along allied lines of ideology and cultural self-preservation - this estrangement reaches its apogee with McKay's unanswerable critique on the hypocrisy of an American commitment to end oppression in Europe: A just war fought by a country that lived under a Jim Crow mentality. Entangled and estranged, McKay seems like the lone wedding guest in Coleridge's *Rime* who isn't invited in from the cold. A sad predicament that is aptly summed up in the unpublished poem "Fixture."

³¹ The *New Masses*, edited by Mike Gold, erroneously described McKay as living the rich and leisure life around the sidewalk cafes of Montmartre.

All things seem fixed....
The little grass plots in brown repose,
The softly-rustling trees,
Through the paving rooted deep.
The mellow autumn vintage flows
Through life, here yellowing the leaves,
That dance down whirling to their season's sleep,
Stirred by the drunken breeze.

The cots are fixed...
The patients come... and go...
Death conquers or the sap of health returns
To build the wreck and ruin of cities strong.
The doctors and the interns pass along,
The nurses flit, light-footed to and fro
To wet the dry tongue, soothe the flesh that burns.

And he stays fixed,
Like the walls, like the cots.
And yellow is his blood,
Like the grass blades in the plots.
Seven times the brown-ripe season,
Has mellowed round him here,
Where the spirits of Hope and Pity meet and brood.

He is fixed,
Sans thought or reason.
When first they brought him in,
With the chancre corroding his throat,
The poisons spreading within,
His mind was an oven of fire,
With all of his senses afloat,
In that furnace of victims of sin,
Where the vengeance-crazed gods in their ire
Consign
Their unfortunate wrecks of desire.

There fixed,
But brave with the bravery of madness.
Day breaks, sun shines, rain falls,
Time patterns from season to season,
And he is fixed in those walls,
Without joy, without sadness.
Firmly fixed,
He looks with fixed eyes, empty eyes,
At the bountiful skies,
From the end of the long corridor.

All persons and things he calls friend
Sans difference...
One questioned him, when it would end?
And he said with no life in his voice, in his eyes:
Jusqu'au mort!

For McKay, this diseased body is consumed in "that furnace of victims" - and becomes, for us, a metaphor on artistic and racial limits. Unlike Renaissance writers, who he sometimes emulated, McKay's own desires needed to be sacrificed in the political realities of a black identity: To kill the body, then, to burn one's flesh to ash-neutral, destroys one's racial story, but enacts another.

A CODA (WITH THANKS TO JANE MARCUS)

For a long time I puzzled over McKay's place in literary history. He didn't fit the usual mold of African-American writers or those of the Caribbean. The reasons, some argued, related to class or color. He himself was placed in the peculiar position of a bigot, who was unaccepting of mulattos and others, so that line of reasoning went, because of prejudices formed in his childhood in Jamaica. Yet he also never quite worked well with communists or any mainstream ideologies we might be familiar with today. There are several schools of thought here: that McKay was a communist, and a quite active one, but sold out to right-wing Catholicism; another is that he never was a communist and always had strong religious yearnings. Who to believe? He was guaranteed, however, to irritate ideologues on the right and left, that's for certain.

It was his remark about the poem "If We Must Die" that got me thinking about McKay, and the puzzle he presented to scholars from the 1960s to present. In a Folkways recording, made in the 1940s, he mentioned how the poem spoke to all forms of oppression, and commented, disappointingly, how it became a bellwether of black consciousness and rage.³²

I went back to the period out of which the poem arose: to, specifically, the year 1919. I found that McKay was, by this time, a radical internationalist. Not an appendage to Communism or the Diaspora, but part of a very vibrant counterculture on the left, hardly discussed in the African American canon as significant. McKay was neither

³² *Anthology of Negro Poets*. New York: Folkways, 1954. Anra Bontemps, editor.

in Harlem nor the conventional race discourses of the day, and always one step out of the range of interest, I found. I dug further and saw connections to international feminists, universal language advocates, pacifists, and old-school abolitionist, such as Frederick Douglass. It was a vein rich in movement and contradictions. McKay was in the tradition, yet outside of it. He straddled a culture that was "in-between": wars, centuries, poetics.

Another impetus for my research involved an incident that occurred not too long ago. I submitted an essay to *American Literature* on McKay thinking, naively I realize now, that he was an American writer. He did produce the signature text, which was *Home to Harlem*, and the first poem to celebrate a new blackness in the twentieth century, "Harlem Dancer." As far as the canon went, he's been a part of the curriculum as early as anyone can remember. But I realize that might have been due to oversight or lack of foresight than conscious scholarly claims: a slight of hand when Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps moved McKay's poems from the Jamaican to American section in the 1950s in their updated *Poetry of the Negro, 1902-1948*.³³ I was in for a shock, however. McKay was not an American, but an English *subject*, I was informed by the editor at *American Literature*.

So, I thought, at that time, what is McKay, and if he is part of a national culture, how is he to be viewed?

More and more, as I contextualized McKay, I found his uniqueness outside of our notion of politics. There were, at the turn of the century, a lot of in-between movements,

³³McKay's position was continually revised and shaped after his death. Another posthumous act of appropriation for McKay occurred in the late 1960s when Langston Hughes worked with Bontemps on revising their monumental *The Poetry of the Negro, 1902-1967*. In the first edition, published in 1949, McKay was included in the Caribbean section. In the later edition, Hughes dropped McKay from the Caribbean section and place him in "the U.S.A. group, our first section . . . Oh well! It's my DETERMINATION," he lamented, "to get the First Book of Negroes revised!" (*Arna Bontemps/Langston Hughes: Letters, 1925-1967*, ed. Charles Nichols, p. 470.) This may have been a minor change, but in terms of McKay's literary position globally it further undermined his significance, for in America he was categorized as a Harlem Renaissance writer.

and McKay straddled all of them like a cultured jockey: the garden movement, Arts and Crafts, Fabianism, pacifism, feminism, vagabondage, and, of course, Diaspora. I found McKay in all those places and, more importantly, where he most comfortably resided. He viewed his place, metaphorically, as the dance floor; a place where the cultural and social were disarmed. He called this his "desire for a perfect unity of movement," and described how it gave him the ecstasy of religion. But McKay's religion was unlike any other that we know.³⁴

To find McKay, I realized, one mustn't start in Harlem. One must go, instead, to the Bloomsbury 1917 club in London and the Hope Botanic Garden in Kingston, Jamaica. In Harlem, one finds a shadowy skeleton of what McKay was thought to be, as elusive as his whereabouts to Harold Jackman

You ask where I live. No place in particular. I live all over Harlem, often sleeping in accidental beds. Where I am supposed to stay does not matter and won't be of any use to you because I am rarely there . . .³⁵

As a literary work of self-discovery, I want to show here that those places "in-between," what I call, diaspora and internationalism, where McKay sleep, ate, found love, and lived poetry, were in fact not accidental but a passion of the era.

³⁴ McKay to Jackman, May 9, 1928. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

³⁵ Part of a letter written upon McKay's return to New York in 1934. Johnson..

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