

“A Thing Apart”: Sonnet Poetics and Radical Politics in Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*

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Abstract: In this paper, I read Claude McKay’s partaking in the English sonnet tradition in *Harlem Shadows* as being a fundamental part of—and not, as many commentators have suggested, counter to—the poet’s and book’s radical politics. Upon contextualizing my readings alongside critics including Houston A. Baker, Jr., Kamau Brathwaite, and Winston James, I perform close readings of McKay’s poems “Subway Wind” and “Outcast.” I specifically analyze how these poems imagine climatic ‘currents’ through images and metaphors of racially marked colonial spaces, which the poems, I suggest, also poetically perform through the actualization of the sonnet form as discursive currents redirected toward liberatory politics.

In the chapter “The Poetry: Form versus Content” of his book *Claude McKay*, James R. Giles reproduces a common line of argument among critics: that Claude McKay’s poetry is limited by a battle between traditional English poetic form on the one hand, and radical politics on the other. He suggests the author never could properly negotiate between the two, leading to a supposed tendency of weak verse. “Unquestionably,” writes Giles, “the main artistic failing of this verse is its frequent triteness of form and language.” Giles suggests that a formal English education led McKay to “imitate sometimes the worst of the British poetic tradition” rather than having “attempted some of the innovations in black form and language that dominate [Langston] Hughes’ poetry” (54).

This skepticism toward McKay’s use of traditional forms seems quite representative of twentieth-century criticism of the poet. Though a “passionate” writer, McKay’s insistence on traditional English form stands, the story often goes, in irredeemable and awkward tension with his Black liberation and Marxist politics as well as his bohemian lifestyle (Hathaway 35). Rather than seen as enabling his

poetry, McKay's use of iambic pentameter, fixed rhymes, and standard English diction are frequently imagined as fatal commitments—suffocating forces that kept him at best a highly skilled poet, but certainly never “a great poet” (Giles 55). Even Winston James, who rethinks McKay's work outside of the “muddled and unsatisfactory” criticism of his use of traditional form, sidesteps reading into the profundity of received poetics in McKay's literary and political projects: “It is true that the radical content of McKay's verse is not matched by a similar daring in its form” (139). Further, while doubting Kamau Brathwaite's assertions that McKay should have stepped outside of English modes and into “nation language” rather than dialect or standard English, James nonetheless regrets that McKay was not “more consistently effective in imparting the rhythm [...] of Jamaican” (139) and agrees with Mervyn Morris when he says that McKay's work is “overburdened with the remembered rhythms and diction of Romantic or Victorian English poetry” (Morris 36).

Such skeptical readings of Claude McKay's poetry seem to limit the readers' potentials for coming to grips with the poems' explorations of power and refusal. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., writes of the presupposition of the Harlem Renaissance's failure, “the scholarly reflections that we possess are, unfortunately, governed by a problematic—a set of questions and issues—that makes certain conclusions and evaluations inevitable. For if one begins with [assumption of its failure], then one is destined to provide a derogatory account of the twenties” (12). The source of this argument, Baker's 1987 *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, is foundational for critically rethinking the productive tensions between form and politics in the Harlem Renaissance, which Baker, through the dual theoretical lenses of ‘the mastery of form’ and ‘the deformation of mastery’ (15), reads as having successfully procured “a specifically Afro-American modernism” (8) and moreover a long-lasting “renaissancism” (91). In regard to Claude McKay and Countee Cullen's formalisms, Baker claims that the poets’ “mastered masks,” these “audible extant forms,” were necessary to produce Black art that would be recognized by a range of publics (85-86, 101). Recognition, however, is not the poems' only accomplishment: “Such masking,” continues Baker, “carries subtle resonances and effects that cannot even be perceived (much less evaluated) by the person who begins with the notion that recognizably *standard* form automatically disqualifies a work” (86). These “subtle resonances and effects,” through the “fluid and always interdependent” modes of mastery and deformation (68), disrupt a “white American discursive

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universe” (22) and open up new discursive worlds that constitute a uniquely Black modernism.

Frequently but not thoroughly building on Baker’s arguments and vocabularies, recent critical assessments of McKay’s formalism are rising amid renewed interest in the writer’s newly published and collected works. With two previously unknown novels published since 2017, the last four years have seen as many McKay novels published as did either the 1920s or 1930s. Furthermore, McKay’s poems were published together for the first time in 2004 as *Complete Poems*. Editor William Maxwell’s positive readings of McKay’s sonnets (“tender, formally accomplished, but fearless and piercing” [xxi]) in the volume’s introduction perhaps point toward the turning of the tides for these old narratives of skepticism, including moving on from accusations of McKay’s supposed ‘abandonment’ of the Harlem Renaissance and weakness for writing sonnets.

In this paper, I engage with Baker’s explorations of the tension between ‘the mastery of form’ and ‘the deformation of mastery’ alongside recent critical work to build more specific readings of the “subtle resonances” in McKay’s experiments with traditional poetic forms. Furthermore, I map how these resonances function as an inseparable part of his poetry’s political work. I read from the poems of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay’s 1922 poetry collection, which with its tight formal adherence and standard English diction managed to both cause “smoldering resentment” and “inaugurate a black American aesthetic” (Gosciak 124). I focus on two of the collection’s poems: “Subway Wind” and “Outcast.” The first is a near-sonnet, but importantly not one, and the latter is a quintessential Shakespearean sonnet.

I consider two particular aspects of these poems. First, the primary concern of this paper is how the employment of traditional poetic form, especially the sonnet, mechanically and symbolically lends itself to the texts’ political work. A second connected issue is the description of a different but related type of form imagined in the text: winds, waves, and weather patterns, which I frame as ‘currents.’ I read these currents as grounding the complicated subjectivities of the sonnets’ speakers in geographically and racially marked spaces of a colonized world, while also contributing to the works’ engagements with shifting forms and redirectable forces. By way of close readings of meter, rhyme, and imagery, I hope to show how *Harlem Shadows’* participation in and reinterpretation of the English sonnet tradition is a dynamic part of the book’s liberatory politics—which the book ultimately offers as a turning of the tides, of discursive currents in an unjust world:

transforming “captive wind” into those which “flow above them fresh and free” (McKay, *Shadows* 54).

“SUBWAY WIND”

“Subway Wind” directly follows “If We Must Die” in the progression of *Harlem Shadows*. However, unlike its famous neighbor, it is not a sonnet but a near-sonnet. While the poem adheres to the iambic pentameter and alternating rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean tradition, “Subway Wind” instead concludes, in lieu of a final heroic couplet, with a full fourth quatrain, which thus continues the pattern of the first three stanzas. I suggest this unexpected twisting of the Shakespearean form effects two primary functions in the poem. First, it creates an unorthodox latitudinal hemisphere that cuts the poem directly into two eight-lined halves. This allows the poem to deeply juxtapose the different climate-driven images of colonial spaces presented by each half’s interpretation of ‘currents’: the “deafening roar” of the “sick and heavy” wind of the New York City Subway in the first half, against the “sleepy waters” of the “islands of lofty palm trees” in the final half. Secondly, I suggest that the narrow neglect of the Shakespearean tradition, particularly considering the placement of the poem in the book (it is preceded by three sonnets and succeeded by another two) simultaneously performs both participation in and subversion of English literary tradition: actualizing the precarious positions of the poems’ speakers. I argue that the power of this implied dialogue fortifies the poem’s explicit content of rebellion, which dirties the space of a segregated, technologized city and cherishes that of a far-away paradisiacal island.

// “The city’s great, gaunt gut”

“Subway Wind” begins by establishing a bleak scene of a New York City Subway car, marked by the book’s 1922 Harlem location. The “sick and heavy air” of the subway setting is occupied by “pale-cheeked children” who selfishly “seek the upper door” and whose laughing is ominously “swallowed in the deafening roar / Of captive wind.” Thus, the poem establishes a violent atmosphere dominated by privileged White occupants. The technologized and racialized space of the subway, a recent feat of urban engineering in the 1920s, is imagined in Dickensian gloom: damp, smelly, and noisy.

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The poem’s sound performs this gloom. Repetition of a mixture of long, hard, and guttural sounds in the first line establishes a dark and mechanical mood. “Subway Wind” begins:

Far down, down through the city’s great, gaunt gut
The gray train rushing bears the weary wind (54)

The first line’s repetition of “down, down” alongside the sharp and throaty “great, gaunt gut / The gray” starts the poem in a plunge and enacts this through deep, cutting sounds. The following lines, three and four, continue this trend:

In the packed cars the fans the crowd’s breath cut,
Leaving the sick and heavy air behind. (54)

Here the assonance of hard, cracking ‘k’ sounds in “packed,” “cars,” “crowds,” “cut,” and “sick” develop the uninhabitable atmosphere in both the poem and the subway, making the opening lines challenging to sound aloud. Additionally, that “cut” is an end rhyme with “gut” drags the sounds into one another, creating an unpleasant mouthy complex—utilizing here the weaving structure of the sonnet-esque rotating iambic lines to elongate a suffocating and oppressive constriction, such as the riders of a crowded New York City Subway might feel.

In accord with the sound’s establishment of subway-as-chamber, particularly through the performance of underground urban echoes, in lines seven and eight, the poem’s pre-volta first half concludes with the White children’s laughter “swallowed in the deafening roar / Of captive wind that moans for fields and seas.” Therefore, like the confinement of the reader’s and speaker’s breath (an oral wind) through iambs, an alternating rhyme scheme, and repetition of guttural sounds, the city’s underground projectile is understood as a tool that swallows and destroys. In addition to the machine of the subway system’s terrifying sounds and “sick” air, the city’s bowels consume children’s laughter and their hopes for a glimpse out of the city. Again, it is wind that acts out this desire for escape in its “moaning for fields and seas.” Currents of the poem’s structure and currents of the poem’s contents thus converge to produce the misery and suffocation of the racially marked, segregated White space of the New York Subway. Though here, in the final and climate-marked word of the poem’s first half—“seas”—the central energetic movement of the poem shifts. It is this irregularly placed volta that makes what seemed to be a sonnet not quite a sonnet in the end. Like the sustained currents of the poem’s

iamb and rhyme, the poem thus moves into the following half, and, with it, arrives a new and antagonistic atmosphere.

// “Lightly among the islands”

The word “seas” is immediately repeated to begin the second half of “Subway Wind.” That it is “seas,” the place of colonialism, the slave trade, and capitalism, that is doubled and, thus, doing this hinging, is crucial in the poem’s development of these two juxtaposed colonial realms. It is over the axis of the sea that the rhythm, sound, and mood of the poem turns: from the “seas” “moan[ed]” for by the subway’s “captive wind[s]” in the poem’s first half, to a description and embrace of those seas and seashores in the poem’s second half. In this new space, however, none of the poem’s first half’s violent diction or harsh sound exists. “Subway Wind” seems to perform the arrival of the transportation it describes, as the first quatrain of the second half instead starts in smooth iambs pulling from one syllable to the next:

Seas cooling warm where native schooners drift
Through sleepy waters, while gulls wheel and sweep
Waiting for windy waves the keels to lift
Lightly among the islands of the deep; (54)

The long vowels act out an arrival in a new poetic climate, reflecting the “islands of the deep” of the poem’s new tropical atmosphere. Particularly when compared to the harsh, consonant-driven, and growling lines of the poem’s first half, a new airy and temperate setting is clearly distinguished from the filth of the segregated, White-run city to the “perfume” of “palm trees blooming white.” The poem’s performance of the two places’ climate markers, however, is polarly different. The “dew drenched night” of the islands is a clear rejection of the city’s “sick and heavy humid air.” Though the poem makes clear, through both diction and sound, which of these damp spaces it condemns and which it celebrates.

This juxtaposition is made especially clear in a comparison of how wind works in both sections’ final lines (8, 16). In the first section, the wind is “captive” and “moaning” to be released from the grip of the White city scene. In the final line of the poem, however, it is instead “Trades”—strong climatic winds—that “float above them fresh and free.” Therefore, McKay employs the same object of

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metaphor, the current of wind, but toward a fundamentally different end. Linking the metaphor between two reflective stanzas allows for a clear juxtaposition as it employs parallel language and structure and thus works within a similar logic, on both of the poem’s contested ends. This makes wind the dividing line around which the poem bends. The reader is in this way faced with two antagonistic and easily comparable images: howling and trapped winds produced by the dark, damp, industrialized bowels of the city versus the absolutely idyllic and pure breezes of the tropical island.

While line eight concludes the first scene’s currents as “captive wind that moans for fields and seas,” the other line of the poem ending in “sea,” line fourteen (which would have concluded a final rhyming couplet had the poem ended like its Shakespearean neighbors), rather marks the second scene by “perfume” and a “tropic sea.” While the sonnet has become the standard at this point in the collection, a routine formal refrain, here, the fourteenth line breaks form by introducing a new end rhyme, the H rhyme, which therefore neglects the expectation of the final voltaic turn and the succeeding GG rhyming couplet. This brings further emphasis to the poem’s horizontal split and, therefore, two antagonistic settings. Importantly, the lines that break from the sonnet tradition are those that most clearly juxtapose the first and second halves of the poem and their colonial contents, which makes the poem depend structurally and thematically on this comparison.

In “Subway Wind,” trapped, unnatural, technologically produced winds from the dark and polluted air of the New York Subway system demonstrate containment in a racialized White, urban, and modern setting; while the latter half of the poem delights in soft sounds and images of leisurely movement of waves and breezes of a paradisiacal island: chaotic and dirty versus harmonious and pure. Each of the poem’s second half’s eight lines, in fact, refers to a sort of pleasant climatic turning: “Seas cooling warm,” “gulls wheel and sweep,” “windy waves,” “lightly among,” “lofty palm trees,” “lend their perfume,” “dew drenched,” and “Trades float above them fresh and free” (54). The poem is careful to understand the difference between its two poles as a turning current. It is along the axis of its mid-poem voltaic shift and the coinciding participation in *and* rejection of the praised sonnet tradition that the poem directs attention to itself as a sort of actualization of shifting currents. The poem itself constitutes a literal resounding oral wind that turns

discourse out of the tides of the segregated realms of the White city and into new worlds.

“OUTCAST”

While “Subway Wind” performs the confinement of a misplaced islander in a White city through an unorthodox mid-poem voltaic shift, the poem “Outcast” fully embraces the traditional Shakespearean sonnet form to explore the spiritual grip that “the white man’s menace” holds on those in the Black diaspora. Pushing against readings of these poems being ineffectively “uneven” (James 140), I find these contradicting formal roles of “Subway Wind” and “Outcast” helpful examples to show how the poems of *Harlem Shadows* productively challenge each other by employing methods that are in direct tight tension with neighboring poems. As shown in the previous consideration of “Subway Wind,” the speaker’s precarious colonial condition is also demonstrated by psychological and structural tensions within individual poems. In “Outcast,” one of McKay’s “violent sonnets” (Gayle 28), the juxtaposition of an imagined “jungle,” to which the speaker is a “native,” against a diametrically opposed “western world,” to which the speaker is “held,” is distinct. Therefore, “Outcast” creates a binary opposition between these two world systems, and it uses the Shakespearean sonnet—thus itself participating in the tradition of the “western world”—as its means to perform the speaker’s colonial boundedness.

I read this restriction as being acted out in two primary ways: first, on a poetical level as performed by the tight metrical patterns and rhyme scheme in the lines of the poem; secondly, in its politics as an exemplary formal actualization of the height of the English poetic tradition, while simultaneously destabilizing and reordering it from within. I suggest that in its embrace with the English sonnet tradition, “Outcast” is a sort of mirror of “Subway Wind.” This inter-poem tension further demonstrates the complicated and shifting positions through which *Harlem Shadows* fluctuates. The text seems to struggle against and surpass itself, performing the speakers’ positions under multiple and shifting discursive realms. I understand this layered tendency as a central dynamic of McKay’s verse, emphatically not its “uneven” failure. In comparative readings, “Outcast” and “Subway Wind” demonstrate this exemplarily. While both poems labor to depict atmospheres of suffocating White structures, “Outcast” fully partakes in the

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Shakespearean tradition of sonnet writing as a means of revealing these toxic fabrications of Whiteness. This use of the English canon therefore seems not primarily a “restriction” (Giles 48) but rather arrives at unraveling the colonial discourse at which it takes aim and in which it takes part.

// “Bondaged by the body”

The English sonnet lends itself to establishing philosophical and political tensions between two poles. Formally, the sonnet depends on pairs: the iamb a two-beat balance of stress and unstress, the quatrain made up of two coupled rhymes, the voltaic shift dividing the poem in two basic energetic modes, the two lines of the heroic couplet succeeding the traditional volta, the poem’s final emphasis on the pair as it shifts to the unique GG rhyme to conclude the poem. In addition to the centrality of pairs, I take into account the actualized boundedness effected by the steady and lacing meter and rhyme scheme of the poem. This literally holds the poem in tact and is explicitly brought to attention in “Outcast” as the text repeatedly references colonial processes of restriction, submission, and force. As in “Subway Wind,” “Outcast” employs an alternating rhyme scheme and pentameter. However, in clear contrast to “Subway Wind,” with its two distinct halves that pull at each other, the true sonnet here has a unified, elongated, and directed energy that continually builds, wearily and tensely inching toward the climactic release of the heroic couplet.

The poem begins with the speaker’s “longing” for “the dim regions” of their “fathers,” again establishing racialized geographical spaces as part of the poem’s negotiation of Black peoples’ origins and heritage. This poem’s first utterance thus establishes the piece as an exploration of what it suggests is the impossible: reunification with the histories stolen from Black people through colonization and enslavement. The poem’s first quatrain reads:

For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs. (45)

The poem continues in climate-based logic, which the collection as a whole has established, as shown in the fighting binary of the idyllic Caribbean island and the

monstrous New York City in “Subway Wind.” Here, instead of the intra-American continental binary, McKay establishes an intercontinental juxtaposition between the “peace” of Africa’s “dim regions” and “jungle songs” and the White-governed “western world.” Importantly, the poem begins in a declaration that the speaker’s “long[ing]” *spirit* is “bondaged” by the *body*. Materiality is imagined as a force of repression and constraint of a more perfect, even more true or absolute, ideal existence.

Exploration of this exterior force is continued in the poem as the material forces of “the great western world,” as well as the materiality of the sonnet form, are described as constricting the poem’s Black speaker:

I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee. (45)

Here, the physical force of abstract systems is materialized in a contortion of the body, particularly within settings described in terms of racialized climate. It is the “peace” of “darkness” that is directly juxtaposed in the neighboring pentameter lines with the grip of “the great western world.” Not only is the repression physical, but also, as the first quatrain establishes, of a “spiritual” dimension. There is “never hope for full release” as long as the speaker is limited to the “alien gods” to which their body is contorted in an act of submission. Therefore, not only is the longed-for “dark” continent of origin described as standing in geographical opposition to the “great western world,” but this colonial power is revealed as an essentially oppressive and dehumanizing system upon the intimately connected realms of the body and the soul (as suggested in the first two lines). The poem thus imagines that physical boundedness—in real time actualized by the poem’s received structured meter—constitutes an exterior choking force that covers a pure essence naturally seeking freedom. This is further developed in the poem’s third and final full quatrain:

Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart.
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart; (45)

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The speaker imagines themselves as “a ghost” stripped of some “vital thing” at their core, perhaps the “forgotten jungle songs” of the poem’s first quatrain. It is Africa, or a proper home outside of the strictures of and unmarked by European colonialism, that the sonnet’s speaker is forever alienated from. This is the place from which the speaker’s “fathers” were stolen and which the speaker describes as having been stolen from the speaker themselves. In light of the collection’s insistent commentary on the relationship of form and content, it is especially interesting that the speaker refers to themselves as “a ghost”: a form with no content, or perhaps content with no form. This mirrors the anxiety of the speakers of *Harlem Shadows*, who continually weave their diasporic experiences through images of transience (light, precipitation, winds: currents). They perform this through the imagined ‘currents’ of the meters and rhyme schemes of the poetic traditions of the “western world,” to which the poems themselves often refer and the speakers explicitly position themselves both within and against. The simultaneous recognition of and resistance to colonial power inhabits the tensions of every beat and every line in the poems that piece together *Harlem Shadows*.

While “Outcast” indeed features a quintessential Shakespearean heroic couplet, in this case it cannot offer full reprieve:

For I was born, far from my native clime,
Under the white man’s menace, out of time. (45)

Rather, the heroic couplet seems to reaffirm and strengthen the colonial grip demonstrated in the three previous quatrains. Even the last words, “out of time,” indicate the speaker’s being abruptly and unexpectedly cut off, literally under the pressure of received poetic form’s strict rules. This final utterance, as if gasped from desperate lips, is rhymed with “clime”—fusing time and space and bringing further attention to one of the collection’s dominant points of reference: changing atmospheric forms in climates racially marked by colonialism.

In *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler develops an account of the way the sonnet form lends itself to exploration of self-within-the-world: “The formal structure of the sonnet [...] is a device for the public exploration of a host of subjects as they relate to an often idealized passion. The sonnet worked to promote a common ideology—of alleged individuality” (316). McKay employs this common form of the sonnet as a means of partaking in a long shared tradition of conversations and interpretations of subjectivity, individuality, and the world. The

poems of *Harlem Shadows* are situated distinctly in the Black speakers' frames of reference, as the reader is witness to—and themselves part of—the colonized world that the speakers touch. Roland Greene, challenging the unity of the form, adds that the sonnet “organizes a vivid stand-off between the world and the self in a short and highly reproducible poetic integer; the breaks in sense and feeling that invariably run through sonnets [...] evidence the shifts in this uneasy but durable balance, where the world interrupts the self and vice versa” (222). The way in which McKay uses the poetics of the sonnet in “Outcast” falls convincingly in line with the sonnet tradition of examining the messy crossroads of “self” and “world.” The three high-strung and tightly bound quatrains, a speaker-subject struggling to assert an individuality against some “interrupting” outside force, all coiling together before a final twist and change in tone and structure—these poetical elements work together in McKay’s project of exploring Black speakers within and against systems that, in part, make them.

“The subject of Shakespeare’s sonnets experiences himself *as* his difference from himself,” writes Joel Fineman: “His identity is an identity of ruptured identification, a broken identity that carves out in the poet’s self a syncopated hollowness” (25). This battle within that is inherent to the Shakespearean sonnet form is highly exploited in McKay’s poems, charged with yet deeper meaning when read as part of the oeuvre of a Black poet born in an English colony. The speakers of McKay’s sonnets, as shown in “Outcast,” understand themselves as intimately connected to and part of the fields of power in and under which they live. Particularly important here is the “hollowness” left of the sonnet-speaker that Fineman writes of. As I have suggested, McKay’s poems frequently engage images of shifting forms and emptiness, about which the fractured speaker of “Outcast” declares: “And I must walk the way of life a ghost / Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.” The poem’s speaker is turned haunting and empty by means of the same world orders employed to actualize the speaker’s resistance. The poem, therefore, understands itself as, paradoxically, both growing out of and growing against these discourses.

// Sonnets “under the white man’s menace”

“In order to be ‘universal,’” writes Kamau Brathwaite, “McKay forsook his nation language, forsook his early mode of poetry and went to the sonnet” (275). Alongside

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framing McKay’s move to the sonnet and “standard English” as a rejection, Brathwaite casts doubt on the use of pentameter more generally, which

carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. And that’s the problem: how do you [...] break out of the entire pentametric mode in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our own experience. (265)

Winston James, however, pushes against Brathwaite’s seeming condemnation of Caribbean writers’ use of received English form, while also destabilizing the idea that McKay could cleanly step out of colonial traditions: “The poetic forms of the Caribbean masses cannot be as easily separated from those of the colonizers as Brathwaite would like one to think” (140). James writes that McKay, whom Brathwaite rather reads as “imprisoned in the pentameter” and the author of “literary colonialism” (Brathwaite 275),

made no secret of the fact that he was wedded to the traditional European poetic forms, but he regarded them to be as much his as they were anybody else’s. Was he not educated in the European tradition and was he not a product of a British colonial environment? Although the traditions of the Jamaican masses have their roots in Africa, they too are overdetermined and burdened by Europe’s. (James 140)

This conversation between Brathwaite and James raises another layer of meaning-making in “Outcast,” and in *Harlem Shadows* more generally. While Brathwaite and James may disagree on McKay’s literary obligations, both seem to accept that “the white man’s menace,” against and through which *Harlem Shadows* positions itself, exists not only as an abstract idea within the logics of the poem, nor only as poetical mechanics that make up the poem, but that it additionally takes meta-root in the very being of the poem as a real-world object stuck to the colonial discourses at which it takes aim, which Baker calls “metadiscourse on linguistic investiture” (56). These poetics, that is, know themselves as an active part of fields of power.

Along these lines, I read the speaker of “Outcast” as at once revealing and unraveling the colonial rule’s ‘grip’ over him by forming, deforming, and reforming inherited European literary traditions. These formal traditions, notes Roland Greene, “manifestly entail the bringing together of history, subjectivity, and poetic artifice” (221). This seems to me to aptly describe much of the work of *Harlem Shadows*: unifying historical, subjective, and aesthetic manifestations of

discourse on the page. Greene adds: “Each form, in other words, embodies a characteristic attitude toward the representation of historical and social events, a set of conventions for accommodating the individual standpoint, and a material realization that adjusts both history and subjectivity to one another and makes their relation seem inevitable” (221). If every received form carries a “characteristic attitude,” “set of conventions,” and “material realization,” to which the text and the readerly experience thereof are always in dynamic relation, how do the sonnet’s particular histories mark the texts of *Harlem Shadows*?

That is: What does it mean to write a sonnet? The Shakespearean sonnet form often employed by McKay is, as its name suggests, inseparably associated with the most notable and praised of all English writers, and thus with the height of English literature and culture (Denizé 100). Introducing McKay’s *Complete Poems*, Maxwell writes that through the form’s material history, the sonnet holds “an exceptionally transnational poetic design, born in medieval Italy but dispersed throughout more of the modern world than any other type of Western lyric” (xxxv). That this transnational form, evolved throughout the “modern” colonial epoch and associated with the height of English tradition, is the most cherished poetic structure in McKay’s literary project is essential in reading his work and not an afterthought of missed opportunity. The form’s unique history of publicity, too, is vital in reading these poems. Jonathan Culler writes that the “prestigious Renaissance form” (319) of the sonnet provided its Renaissance writers “a material public challenge” in which “courtiers could display their wit” (69). In reading *Harlem Shadows*, one bears witness to the work of a writer, born in a British colony founded on surplus produced by the enslavement of Black people, who engages precisely this form so long associated with celebrated courtly English spirit in a time and movement that was later, in large part because of the book at hand, itself to be called a ‘renaissance.’

“Outcast”’s employment of the sonnet form’s dialectical energy and sense of metrical and sonic constraint—as well as the form’s prized, ‘prestigious,’ ‘courtly spirit’—demonstrates both the existence and the infallibility of “the white man’s menace.” The poem presents a dynamic discursive experience formed by the Shakespearean sonnet’s rules, themselves born at the British turn into colonial empire: dividing the text into neat iambs, sharp line breaks, and ordered rhymes. Yet, as throughout *Harlem Shadows*, resistance, refusal, and celebration slip past the imperfect bounds of received colonial forms. Houston A. Baker, Jr., specifically

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linking these modes of Black modernism to Shakespeare and postcolonial theory in his reading of Caliban’s being taught language by his occupier in *The Tempest*, suggests reading this tension of restructuring of language inherent in the ‘deformation of mastery’ not just as “a dilemma,” but “as the motivating challenge of *writing* as a project in and for itself” (56). Baker continues:

The Afro-American spokesperson who would perform a deformation of mastery [...] must transform an obscene situation, a cursed and tripled metastasis, into a signal self/cultural expression. The birth of such a self is never simply a coming into being, but always, also, a release from a BEING POSSESSED. [...] Black writers, one might say, are always on *display*, writing a black renaissance and righting a Western Renaissance that was, in the words of Ralph Ellison’s preacher in *Invisible Man*, “most black, brother, most black.” Language, insists Jacques Derrida, is a “possibility founded on the general possibility of writing.” (56)

McKay, or any poet choosing to write sonnets, consciously steps into what is a tradition of imagined English and White cultural supremacy through the tool of the most ‘prestigious’ manifestation of all European language and sociality. Therefore, McKay, as a writer from an English colony who through colonial discourse has been racialized Black, employs this mode, always ‘on display,’ in destabilizing, ‘deforming,’ and ‘transforming’ ways. Much like the poet himself, McKay’s speakers engage the ‘modern’ colonial world—its beauties and its violences—as migrating laborers, anti-capitalist theorists, queer lovers, and bohemians, and they document their complex relationships to the world through their production of poetic subjectivities fluctuating between social realms while always marked in myriad ways, yet never determined, by colonial discourse: “the white man’s menace.” McKay pushes back against White colonial violences, forging new discursive worlds and world orders as he reorganizes colonial constraint toward liberatory action in the grammars of the sonnet form.

CONCLUSION

In light of recent MFA-induced reclamation of received form—witnessed in the work of Terrance Hayes, Franny Choi, Ben Lerner, or Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, who calls the sonnet “a little Pandora’s box, a little hell where hope was also tethered, a cell to escape”—Claude McKay’s poetry seems to be asking for new ways

of reading, with great insight into the perplexities of where power and poems meet. In addition to the poet's biography of rural beginnings, dynamic political activity, queer sexuality, theorizing of Blackness and Caribbean identities, religious revelations, and an internationalist devotion to move through borders, Claude McKay's verse itself demonstrates somehow making liberatory politics out of received structures. McKay's poetry "is naming this thing, and also by that way getting past it" (Young 00:00:50).

"Outcast" and "Subway Wind" are helpful poems to illuminate these precarious relationships between poetics and politics. Through their mastery and deformation of the received bounded meters, dialectical structures, and subjective unease of the English sonnet, these two poems reveal White colonial power precisely as they flourish in their refusal thereof—through their relationship with their form's material histories as well as with their readers' myriad presents. As the poems move in the shifting currents of climates marked by colonialism's reach, they move, too, through the currents of the semantic fields of received discourse.

Alain Locke engages precisely this metaphor of currents in introducing the social shifts manifested in *The New Negro*, the 1925 anthology that cemented the literary and artistic range that came to be called the Harlem Renaissance. Locke describes the "racialism of the Negro" as a harnessing of established flows of power into new directions: "a constructive effort to build the obstructions in the stream of his progress into an efficient dam of social energy and power." Before quoting from Claude McKay's sonnet "To the Intrenched Classes," Locke adds: "We realize that we cannot be undone without America's undoing" (12). This undoing of the flows of American power is made material through the brimming energy of the "Pandora's box" of McKay's sonnets, forming a sounding through and a sounding against, and ultimately a sounding beyond: a never wholly comfortable tension that stirs the currents of discourse, conjuring new weather patterns, new climates, for language and for power.

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Festus Claudius McKay (September 15, 1889 – May 22, 1948) was a Jamaican writer and poet, and was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. In 1919 McKay wrote "If We Must Die", one of his best known works. He wrote five novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), a best-seller that won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, *Banjo* (1929), *Banana Bottom* (1933), *Romance in Marseille* (published in 2020), and in 1941 a manuscript called *Amiable With Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the... Back to Previous*. *Harlem Shadows*. By Claude McKay. 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. Posted: February 2, 2016 | Author: ZÃ³calo Poets | Filed under: Claude McKay, English | Tags: Black History Month poems |Comments Off on Claude McKay: selected poems from "Harlem Shadows" (1922). Claude McKay (1889-1948, Jamaica / New York / Chicago). Selected poems from *Harlem Shadows* (1922). . America .Â Something in me is lost, forever lost, Some vital thing has gone out of my heart, And I must walk the way of life a ghost Among the sons of earth, a thing apart; For I was born, far from my native clime, Under the white man's menace, out of time. . . . I Know My Soul .Â 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. . Poet and novelist Claude McKay (1889-1948) was one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of black American intellectual and artistic talents in 1920s Harlem. McKay's background was an unusual one, producing the intersections that would mark his literary development. Born into relative prosperity in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, he lived in Kingston as a young man, where he met the English folklorist Walter Jekyll, who encouraged him to write in dialect. After the publication of his first two collections, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, he emigrated to the US. He went on to travel widely in Europe, but never returned to Jamaica.