

Claude McKay's Constabulary Aesthetics: The Social Poetics of the Jamaican Dialect Poems

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Two photos of Claude McKay from the *Daily Gleaner* in 1911 foreground the dual roles of constable and poet that McKay occupied, painfully, in Kingston, Jamaica. In an article from October 7, he appears in his police uniform (fig. 1) with a level gaze directed just past the reader.¹ In an article from October 21, he appears in suit and tie (fig. 2) with chin slightly raised, eyes directed toward the reader in a proud and challenging look.² In the first, McKay stands in for colonial discipline and the law: Winston James notes that McKay's "policeman's badge gave him access to forms of life in the city that he otherwise might not have encountered at all, and certainly not encountered with the same degree of frequency and depth of familiarity."³ In the second, McKay's image carries the authority of the intellectual and the poet. This essay contends that McKay's poetry fuses the identities suggested by the two photographs into a difficult hybrid, giving the policeman the poet's gaze and vice versa. In other words, McKay's aesthetic pose, or the gaze of the poet listening for the lyric voice, overlaps with the pose of a member of the colonial constabulary, policing his own black community under the orders of the colonial governor. McKay's claim to aesthetic experimenta-

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1. William Alexander Stephenson, "The Work of a Gifted Jamaican," *Daily Gleaner*, October 7, 1911.

2. William Alexander Stephenson, "More about the Work of a Gifted Jamaican," *Daily Gleaner*, October 21, 1911.

3. Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London: Verso, 2000), 70.

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MR. CLAUDE McKAY.

Figure 1. Claude McKay in the *Daily Gleaner*, Saturday, October 7, 1911. © The Gleaner Company Limited, 2013. Image courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.

tion lies in the poetry he forges out of these two roles and in the tenuous forms of reciprocity he develops between the English lyric tradition and the dialect of a Jamaican community under stress in the early twentieth century.

McKay's early Jamaican poetry, particularly his dialect poetry, has not received the sort of attention given to the works of high modernism, perhaps because of the unfamiliarity of its cultural and historical context and because his work in traditional lyric forms may seem incompatible with conceptions of modernism's formal iconoclasm.⁴ McKay's earliest poems

4. For an early overview of these poems, see William H. Hansell, who enumerates four types of McKay poems: "poems on commonplace settings and activities, love poems, poems portraying the peasant mind, and poems with racial or social themes" ("Some Themes in the Jamaican Poetry of Claude McKay," *Phylon* 40 [1979]: 124). Hansell insists that the "value" of McKay's early verse is in his treatment of these themes, not in his appropriation of the ballad: "What value is there in examining McKay's early dialect verse? The verse itself is almost doggerel; the love poems are at best merely conventional in expressing the pleasures and pains of lovers. Most of his other poems are simple portraits of a land and people dear to the



MR. CLAUDE McKAY.

(Photo By Morris)

Figure 2. Claude McKay in the *Daily Gleaner*, Saturday, October 21, 1911. © The Gleaner Company Limited, 2013. Image courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.

author. . . . The real value, however, of the early poems is that they clearly show that McKay did not learn protest by being the victim of American racism" (138–39). Similarly, Wayne Cooper, McKay's biographer, after devoting several pages to close readings of McKay's newspaper verse, gives a qualified judgment that "despite his genuine achievements in *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, these volumes too often betrayed McKay's literary inexperience, emotional confusion, and intellectual immaturity" (*Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987], 46). Laurence Breiner and William J. Maxwell are among those who give detailed readings of the poems. Breiner argues that McKay's early poems "constitute a real commitment to Jamaican speech as a legitimate means of literary expression" (Laurence A. Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* [Cambridge University Press, 1998], 169). Maxwell states, likewise, that McKay "freed written creole from the trap of 'darky' humor and apology" (Claude McKay, *Complete Poems*, ed. William J. Maxwell [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004], xx). Kamau Brathwaite, although a strong supporter of McKay's use of nation language, criticizes the poems for being "imprisoned in the pentameter," even though much of McKay's early work is in tetrameter (Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993], 275). Winston James argues that McKay "succeeded in capturing the pathos and thinking of ordinary Jamaicans in their own language." See James, *Fierce Hatred of Injustice*, 139–51.

from *The Gleaner* are representative of his consistent interest in traditional forms, particularly the ballad and the sonnet. His oeuvre includes two volumes of dialect poems from 1912, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*; two collections of ballads and sonnets in Standard English, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922); "The Clinic," a series written while under treatment for syphilis in 1923; "Cities" (ca. 1934), an astonishing collection of sonnets set in Africa, Europe, and the United States; "The Cycle" (ca. 1943), a biting satirical sonnet cycle about Harlem in the 1940s; and a set of late Catholic poems.⁵ McKay's adoption of fixed forms has been considered symptomatic of personal confusion, of an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the parts of his identity as a black intellectual, a Kingston policeman, and a Jamaican peasant. But his early newspaper poems make it clear that McKay imposes the scheme of the ballad for good reasons: its history as a vehicle for social commentary, its consistent meter, and its circling refrains. I begin by considering some of the features of McKay's early work—particularly his use of a modified ballad scheme, of dialect, and of the refrain. In the second part of the essay, I move to *Harlem Shadows* to draw some continuities between the tropes and schemes of the sonnet and the voices of the earlier ballads. Looking at McKay's poems closely, I conclude, might lead us to reconsider the incompatibilities among the complex aesthetics of modernism, the choice to work within traditional modes, and a democratic impulse toward a collective voice.

I

On January 14, 1907, only days after McKay arrived in Kingston, an earthquake devastated the city, destroying the trade school in which he was to study.⁶ When he returned to Kingston in 1910, the partially rebuilt city offered only marginally better opportunities than the countryside, where McKay would have had to work on the farms of absentee landlords. On these estates, a workforce was imported from India and China to keep wages well below the poverty line, circumstances that forced many Jamaican workers to leave to work on the Panama Canal or in the United States.⁷ One of McKay's few options in Kingston was to join the police force. A series of articles in the *Daily Gleaner*, "Pen and Picture Sketches of Squalid Kings-

5. These poems are collected in William J. Maxwell's invaluable *Complete Poems*, along with a critical introduction, publication history, and extensive notes. I am indebted to Maxwell's notes for the *Gleaner* source information and to the University of Virginia library for microfilm of the newspaper.

6. See Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 21.

7. *Ibid.*, 40. For a reading of McKay's novel *Banana Bottom* that situates it in the socio-economic context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jamaica, see Rupert Lewis, "Claude McKay's Jamaica," *Caribbean Quarterly* 23 (1977): 40.

ton,” gives us a snapshot of the dire poverty of the sections of the city McKay patrolled. Written in a hybrid style somewhere between the travelogue and the urban exposé, “Squalid Kingston” features the author, William Alexander Stephenson, or “W.A.S.,” wandering the city, investigating slums and talking to characters of local color. This series appeared on Saturdays during the summer of 1911.⁸ On October 7, 1911, the reader turning to page 6 and expecting a new picture of a slum would find instead a full-page article, an interview by Stephenson, a picture of a police officer, and four poems representing “The Work of a Gifted Jamaican.”

The first two poems by McKay that Stephenson publishes, “De Dog-Driver’s Frien” and “Agnes o’ de Village Lane,” continue Stephenson’s investigative journalism by means of the ballad.⁹ McKay’s early poetry from the *Daily Gleaner* describes similar places, local characters, and street scenes and appears directly alongside the *Gleaner’s* prose journalism. The ballad has rarely been connected to modernism, despite the fact that most of the high modernists—particularly Hardy, Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot, Pound, Auden, and Bishop—wrote a significant number of ballads or ballad-like poems throughout their careers.¹⁰ Part of the reason for the widespread, although understudied, modernist adoption of the ballad is the form’s potential to contest and subvert the single voice or single consciousness of the lyric “I,” a project in which most of the modernist poets were, to varying degrees, engaged. The *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) notes three traits of the ballad: a narrative that focuses on a single, catastrophic episode; a dramatic structure, often including dialogue; and an impersonal voice, with a speaker who expresses a collective.¹¹ Susan Stewart identifies a similar transfer in the ballad from the expression of a single consciousness to that of a collective voice, although she warns against treating the ballad “as having a particular set of immutable characteristics.”¹² As Stewart describes it, “the ballad singer in turn takes the form of each of the ‘characters’ in a ventriloquistic fashion. Even when a traditional ballad works by means of third-person narration, the speaker ‘voices’ quotes and makes statements with the

8. Parts of the series have been republished by the University of the West Indies in book form as “*Squalid Kingston*,” 1890–1920: *How the Poor Lived, Moved and Had Their Being*, ed. Brian L. Moore and Michele A. Johnson (Kingston: Social History Project, 2000).

9. Published in the *Daily Gleaner*, October 7, 1911.

10. See, however, Susan Stewart on Hardy in “Lyric Possession,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 51–59; Helen Vendler on Yeats in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 111–46; and, for a discussion of the ballad’s fortune later in the twentieth century, Karen Jackson Ford, “The Last Quatrain: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ends of Ballads,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56 (2010): 371–95.

11. Albert V. Friedman, “Ballad,” in *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton University Press, 1993).

12. Susan Stewart, “Scandals of the Ballad,” *Representations* 32 (1990): 138.

authority of an observer in context or witness.”¹³ The speaker of the ballad, by performing in multiple voices, stages “the subject’s tragic relation to the social,” whether the contending forces are the court and the individual, as in the anonymous “Sir Patrick Spens,” or time and love, as in Auden’s “As I Walked out One Evening.”¹⁴ Yet the ballad’s representation and enactment of what David Caplan calls “a community in distress” also highlights one of the ways in which ballads can do the positive cultural work that Maureen McLane has described as “crossing beyond, or at least confounding, barriers.”¹⁵

These stylistic traits of the ballad point toward its border crossings—its mobile inquiries into otherwise invisible ways of seeing, making, and doing.¹⁶ In “Agnes o’ de Village Lane,” the work of McKay’s ballad is to shift attention from the speaker’s grief for and recognition of Agnes to a kind of solidarity with her. As Winston James explains, the name “Agnes” refers to a childhood love of McKay’s who moved from the inland towns of Clarendon Parish to Kingston and died in a brothel.¹⁷ McKay nods to Keats’s revision of the legend of St. Agnes’s Eve, the night when a virgin supposedly finds her future husband, as well as his “study in bereft love,” the ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (1819).¹⁸ “Agnes o’ de Village Lane” relocates Keats from the gothic chambers and “triumphs gay / Of old romance” to the lush hillsides of Clarendon and the brothels of Kingston. Madeline’s angelic weeping for the “blisses of her dream” becomes the “scaldin’ tear” of McKay’s nameless speaker, or what Wordsworth might call the “natural and human tears” shed by the lyrical ballad.¹⁹

McKay uses a typical modification of the ballad quatrain for his short, plangent story, concluding every *abab* stanza with a *cc* refrain, each a variation on the words “Agnes o’ the lane”:

Fancy o’ me childish will,
Playin’ now before me eyes,

13. *Ibid.*, 150.

14. *Ibid.*, 151.

15. David Caplan, *Questions of Possibility* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 112; Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16.

16. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006), 45.

17. James, *Fierce Hatred of Injustice*, 102. James explains that McKay and Agnes had written love letters to each other as schoolchildren, for which McKay was beaten by his brother U. Theo.

18. I am grateful to Herbert Tucker for the reference and the phrasing.

19. John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (New York: Penguin, 1988), 321; William Wordsworth, quoted in McLane, *Balladeering*, 67.

Sadly I remember still
 How much once your love I prize',
 As I think o' you again,
 Agnes o' de village lane.

In de school-room worn an' old
 Fus' I saw your pretty smile,
 Heard your footsteps firm an' bold,
 Loved your face so free o' guile,
 An' your soul so clear of stain,
 Agnes, Agnes o' de lane.

Oh, I suffered much for you,
 For dey t'umped an' beat poor me
 Tell me skin tu'n black an' blue,
 Tryin' ef day could part we;
 But we closer grew we twain,
 Heartful Agnes o' de lane.

Little love t'oughts o' me breast
 I wrote by de tin lamp's light:
 P'raps dey were not of de best
 (Bunny showed me what to write),
 Yet you never would complain,
 Easy Agnes o' de lane.

But dere came de partin' day,
 An' they took me from you, dear,
 An' de passion died away,
 But de memory was there:
 Long you've lingered in me brain,
 Plump-cheeked Agnes o' de lane.

A'ter many a weary year,
 Sad, sad news o' you I heard,
 News dat brought a scaldin' tear
 At de sound o' every word;
 An' my mind, filled wid disdain,
 Grieved for Agnes o' de lane.

Agnes o' de lane no more,
 For you went away, my pet,
 Agnes once so sweet an' pure,
 To a miserable deat';
 Oh, de 'membrance brings me pain,
 Fallen Agnes o' de lane!²⁰

20. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 1–2.

In the first stanza, the scheme of chiasmus tropes the process by which Agnes's love initially recedes behind the speaker's attention to his own emotions. Chiasmus, or the repetition of a pair of sounds, words, phrases, or ideas in the reverse order, produces an *abba* structure, as in lines 3 and 4:

1a	2a		
	Sadly I remember still		
	2b	1b	
	How much once your love I prize'		

The function of the chiasmic scheme here is to draw an antithesis between the present and the past, "I remember" and "I prize[d]." We see the chronic activity of present memory ("still") at odds with the acute feeling of the past experience ("once"). The syntax overwhelms the speaker with adverbs, which span the enjambment in a stuttering grief ("Sadly—still—how much—once . . .") like that of the shattered voices in Thomas Hardy's elegies for Emma Gifford. It will be the project of the succeeding stanzas to turn the speaker away from the ineffability of grief to the body of Agnes instead.

The second stanza begins this work by organizing, in parallel, a series of prepositional phrases that will ultimately lead us to consider the refrain, "Agnes o' de lane." This stanza catalogs the speaker's perceptions of Agnes, beginning with the "school-room worn an' old" in which she and the speaker meet: her footsteps are "firm an' bold," her face "free o' guile," her soul "clear of stain." These descriptions are aligned at the end of each line, just as the senses of the speaker—saw, heard, loved—are aligned at the beginning. The syntax places Agnes's footsteps, face, and soul between the speaker's observation and his subjective description of each physical and metaphysical quality. By extension of the previous parallel syntactic schemes, "o' de lane" and its connotations of prostitution become inextricably linked to Agnes. McKay's repetition of "Agnes o' de lane" thus has a function distinct from what John Hollander calls the "fa-la-la" of the refrain.²¹ In McKay's poem, the refrain departs and returns with Agnes at the end of each stanza to collect another of her attributes, first repeating her name, "Agnes," and then the adjectives "heartful," "easy" (in the sense of "uncomplaining"), "plump-cheeked," and "fallen." The refrain sweeps up an Agnes fragmented and phantomlike and haunts the poem with its insistence on her lingering presence.

As the dialect form of the genitive "of," the "o" in McKay's refrain turns orality into written poetic trope. A jagged linguistic surface, typical of McKay's Jamaican poems, lies over "Agnes" and her "o." Michael North and Jahan Ramazani have placed McKay's early poetry on a spectrum between Standard English and Jamaican patois. Ramazani writes that McKay

21. John Hollander, *Melodious Guile* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 133.

creates “a transnational discursive field in which the forces and counterforces of converging, jostling, competing nationalities meet.”²² In this sense, McKay’s verse resembles *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*. But whereas other modernist writers juxtapose these voices in order to rupture the stanza and “break the pentameter,” McKay retains the scaffolding of the ballad’s architecture.²³ Instead of situating these voices in sequence, as Eliot and Pound would do, McKay layers them on one another, so that a reading of a McKay poem entails an excavation or archaeology of the composite linguistic strata of each poem. McKay’s collages, if we can call them that, occur in time, through simultaneity, in the same space, whereas Eliot’s and Pound’s occur across time, over space; his are not the “montage poetics” sometimes ascribed to modernist poets—or, if they are, the montage must be reconceptualized within the traditional isometric form of the ballad.²⁴ From the very beginning of his career, McKay rejects a unified style in favor of a heterogeneous one, a process analogous to what Giorgio Agamben, in his study of vernacular Italian poetry, calls the “reciprocal deformation” of both languages.²⁵

In his discussion of McKay’s hybrid style, North draws our attention to the patronage of Walter Jekyll, a wealthy English expatriate and an early mentor of McKay’s who encouraged him to write in dialect.²⁶ Jekyll was a peripatetic ex-Episcopalian minister and music teacher, a friend of Robert Louis Stevenson, and a brother of the garden designer Gertrude Jekyll, who published her own reviews of McKay’s poems in *Garden Illustrated* as a guide to Jamaican flora.²⁷ Early reviews of McKay’s Jamaican poems, although positive, insisted on the value of dialect for its verisimilitude, its accurate reflections of Jamaican peasant life, or else its “charmingly naïve” expressions of subjectivity.²⁸ Although North has warned against valorizing dialect, reminding us that “the nonstandard is maintained as a carefully limited escape from the standard,” it is the layering of vernacular and Standard English, not the choice between them, that we find in McKay’s early work.²⁹ The code switching of McKay’s Jamaican poetry is neither a disengagement from the complex aesthetics of modernism nor a capitulation to Walter Jekyll’s influence. The formal intricacy of McKay’s poems de-

22. Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 30. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 104.

23. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 538.

24. Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

25. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999), 47.

26. See also Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 23.

27. *Ibid.*, 385 n. 51.

28. Walter Jekyll, quoted in McKay, *Complete Poems*, 284.

29. North, *Dialect of Modernism*, 104.

depends on the use of dialect: by rejecting a unified style, McKay stages the violence directed toward the subjects of his poetry at the same time as he rewrites their histories in terms associated with neither a “wholly colloquial Jamaican dialect” nor a “stereotyped Victorian romanticism.”³⁰

McKay's refusal “to stifle this Babel of voices” is particularly evident in “De Dog-Driver's Frien’,” published alongside “Agnes o’ de Village Lane.”³¹ In this dramatic monologue, a plea for compassion and brotherhood, the speaker addresses his “comrades,” the policemen:

Stay your hasty hands, my comrades,
I must speak to you again;
For you beat de dog 'dout mussy,
An' dey are we night-time frien'.
Treat dem kindly, treat dem kindly,
For dey are God's creatures, too;
You have no more claim, dear comrades,
On de earth dan what dey do.³²

In the stanzas that follow, McKay's speaker tries to engender a feeling of solidarity between the policeman and the criminal on the basis of their mutual dispossession and their relegation to the “extra dark” nights and the “cold an' dreary hours.”³³ McKay draws on the ballad's penchant for including conversation and dialogue by having the speaker refer to the poem as an act of speaking (line 2) and talking (line 36). As he imagines a tentative common ground between the policeman making his rounds at night and the “gambolling” criminal, McKay creates a composite voice in which the Jamaican dialect and Standard English confront and play off one another. The first evidence of patois is in the line “For you beat de dog 'dout mussy,” or “without mercy”: McKay takes advantage of the frequent plosives in Jamaican dialect—the “d” and “t” sounds—and the substitution of “'dout” for “without” to graft a staccato beat, almost a syncopation, onto the trochaic tetrameter line. Here, the generally regular meter of alternating eight- and seven-syllable lines is conjoined with McKay's improvisations on top of it, making the relationship between Standard English and Jamaican patois complexly symbiotic.³⁴ The ethics of McKay's creole—the resistance

30. Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 37.

31. I take the phrase “stifle this Babel of voices” from Jean-Jacques Lecercle's discussion of Thomas Hardy's style in *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990), 246.

32. *Daily Gleaner*, October 7, 1911; McKay, *Complete Poems*, 101.

33. William J. Maxwell notes that an extra stanza, making the theme of common oppression more explicit, was added to the version published in *Constab Ballads*. The stanza begins: “When I think of our oppressors / Wid mixed hatred an' don'-care” (McKay, *Complete Poems*, 298).

34. Breiner refers to McKay's “sensitivity to the rhythmic features of the spoken language” as a “potential source of counterpoint to the forms used” (*West Indian Poetry*, 109).

“De Dog-Driver’s Frien” poses to a single, unified style—is in its extended negotiation between English meter and Jamaican diction and syntax.

McKay creolizes the ballad to develop, through the metaphor of the “dog-driver,” a compound sense of social catastrophe. When the poem appeared, McKay’s term “dog-driver” would be a familiar, derogatory nickname for a policeman, as William J. Maxwell notes.³⁵ To readers of the *Gleaner*, however, the term would be familiar for its literal meaning as well. In the weeks after “De Dog-Driver’s Frien” was published, two articles described the controversial killing of stray dogs in 1911 Kingston, or what W.A.S. would call the “Slaughter of the Innocents.”³⁶ Stephenson presses the issue by means of a character sketch of “Long John,” the amoral dog-catcher. He concludes with a general indictment of a society that produces stray dogs and reminds readers that “to most of these poor creatures death is a relief, for many of their owners are unable to feed themselves.”³⁷ The following week’s article, “Lef Me Dawg,” begins where Stephenson leaves off, describing “a brawny washerwoman, with all the evidence of her toil about her.” Again, the conclusion is that “she doesn’t know how to take care of herself, let alone a dog.” Yet the writer tries a more moderate strategy, asking “why not do all the dog-catching in the calm, cool and peaceful night when the mots [*sic*] objectionable curs chiefly roam?”³⁸ McKay’s own appeal, printed several weeks before these articles, can be seen to set up the same homology between the dog’s plight and the poor criminal’s. This doubling of dog-driver and policemen does not, however, debase or trivialize either of the two causes. When the metaphor is ignored and the word “dog-driver” restored to its literal meaning, the poem loses none of its contemporary social relevance. Rather, the poem draws as much on the public’s anger against the dogcatcher as against police brutality, so that McKay effectively reaches the audiences of two progressive initiatives. McKay’s poem, when placed alongside the articles by Stephenson and “Long Wood,” appears to be one of several modes by which the *Gleaner* hoped to raise a public outcry.

Rather than choosing between dialect and Standard English, McKay experiments with what might emerge from their tensed conjuncture. In these early poems, the prominence of the refrain, the archaic name for which is the “burden,” is worth a closer look. Two Christmas poems, published in the *Daily Gleaner* and the *Jamaican Times* on December 16, 1911, entwine the ballad’s “burden” with the burden of daily labor.³⁹ Wayne Co-

35. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 298.

36. *Daily Gleaner*, October 28, 1911.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Daily Gleaner*, November 4, 1911.

39. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 280.

per notes that “McKay’s Christmas complaint reflected actual economic hardships” in Clarendon Parish in 1911, hardships that may have influenced McKay’s turn to more explicit political themes in his poems from early 1912, such as “Peasants’ Ways o’ Thinkin’” and “Passive Resistance.”⁴⁰ In the context of his poems from the period, “Christmas” would have been an overdetermined word for McKay and his readers. The Jamaican Christmas Rebellion of 1831, led by Sam Sharpe, directly contributed to Parliament’s abolition of slavery in the British Empire seven years later.⁴¹ McKay’s poem “George William Gordon to the Oppressed Natives” invokes Sharpe in its exhortations:

Wil’erforce has set you free,
Sharpe an’ Buxton worked for you;
Trample on de tyranny
Still continued by a few!⁴²

During the Christmas Rebellion, twenty to sixty thousand slaves revolted against their masters through armed violence, passive resistance, and the destruction of slaveholders’s property.⁴³ As Cedric Robinson reminds us, slavery persisted, despite formal emancipation, in the various guises of “peonage, sharecropping, tenant-farming, forced labour, penal labour, and modern peasantry.”⁴⁴ The Christmas Rebellion is, quite literally, here in McKay’s “air,” or song: each successive stanza diagnoses new forms of oppression by “metropolitan capital” and the plantocracy.⁴⁵

Of the two Christmas poems, published on the same day, the first poem is a joyful celebration; the second, a depiction of squalor. McKay, an inveterate producer of new stanza forms, uses a simple change in rhyme scheme to contrast the family trading Christmas gifts and the family attended by disease and want. In “The Christmas Tree,” the final lines link the previous stanzas together:

What a happy band are we,
Dancin’ roun’ de Christmas tree!
De old year is at its close
An’ we know nought ’bouten woes:
We’re as happy as could be,
Playin’ wid de red god-rose.⁴⁶

40. Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 47–48.

41. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed, 1983), 219.

42. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 15; gloss on poem, 282–83.

43. Reckford, quoted in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 219.

44. *Ibid.*, 219.

45. Craton, quoted *ibid.*, 219. See Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 48.

46. *Daily Gleaner*, December 16, 1911; McKay, *Complete Poems*, 6.

The scheme here is *aabbab*. Typically for McKay, all the lines are end-stopped and the close of a rhyme coincides with the end of a complete thought, image, sentence, or clause. Borrowing a rhyme from each, the last couplet binds the two thoughts together in a synthesis that also introduces a new image: the red god-rose, or mistletoe. Here, the red god-rose, an indication of Christ's suffering, is annexed to the joys of Christmas day, summoning up not rebirth but death. In the second poem, "Christmas in de Air," McKay chooses to include a refrain, repeating the first rhyme at the end of each successive stanza:

Dere is Christmas in de air:—
 But de house is cold an' bare,
 An' me wife half paralyze'
 Is a-dyin' wid bad eyes;
 Food too is so extra dear,
 An' dere's Christmas in de air.⁴⁷

The tight economy of rhyme, *aabbaa*, captures the poverty of the scene, enclosing the middle lines. Whereas "The Christmas Tree" entwines the first four lines, even creating a surplus image in the final couplet, "Christmas in de Air" is a dirge that returns again and again to a savagely ironic refrain. McKay's speaker takes up, stanza by stanza, the poor trade in coffee and yams (lines 8–9), the failure of bananas to make up for the decline in sugar exports (13), the exclusion of the poor from medical care (19), the shortage of work (25), the high prices of food (31–32), the absence of a progressive tax code (34), and the acknowledgment that "surplus-gain" is only had at the expense of the poor (40). Even while he draws on "Christmas" to summon the outrage that caused the rebellion, McKay also reminds the reader that a single rebellion, no matter how successful in eliminating one form of oppression, cannot preclude new forms of slavery brought on by global markets. Read in the light of the Christmas Rebellion, the final refrain of each stanza—"An' dere's Christmas in de air"—becomes more than a hollow platitude or an ironic commentary on Christmas: as the poem unfolds into a catalog of exploitation, the repetition of the line turns into a charged response.

II

The two Christmas poems, along with "Agnes o' de Village Lane" and "De Dog-Driver's Frien'," give us a more complete picture of the origins of McKay's stylistic innovation in his blending of dialect and the English literary canon. Although readers of McKay have been sensitive to his use of

47. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 7.

received forms, few have examined these forms as closely as they might. McKay's stanza of choice is the quatrain, common to both the ballad and the sonnet forms: nearly every poem in *Songs of Jamaica*, *Constab Ballads*, and *Harlem Shadows* contains some variation on it. It is only partially correct, then, to claim, as Kamau Brathwaite does, that "in order to be 'universal' McKay forsook his nation language . . . and went to the sonnet."⁴⁸ McKay's sonnets do make up a large portion of the poems in *Harlem Shadows* (thirty out of seventy-four poems), yet all of these poems, sonnets included, test the capacities of the quatrain.⁴⁹

The pentameter line, in which McKay writes most of his sonnets from *Harlem Shadows*, has always had an uneasy, even antagonistic, relationship to the ballad. Summarizing a claim made by Anthony Easthope in *Poetry as Discourse*, David Caplan writes, "English literary history forms a battle between the ballad and the pentameter, with the ballad as the valiant loser."⁵⁰ Despite its victory (and Caplan is certainly skeptical of this claim), contemporary anthologies and poets continue to raise the question whether, as Jeff Hilson says, "the sonnet [is] a form suited to consistent innovation."⁵¹ Instead, the sonnet has been established as a healthy alternative for those poets who "rejected overt modernism." As Stephen Burt and David Mikics write in the introduction to their recent book *The Art of the Sonnet*, "those Harlem Renaissance poets who embraced European and English forms in general (such as Countee Cullen and Claude McKay) produced well-turned sonnets; those who sought folk, vernacular or modernist styles for African-American experience (such as Langston Hughes) avoided the form."⁵²

Why would a "modernist style" preclude the use of the sonnet? William Carlos Williams, in "The Modern Primer," sets out perhaps the most vehe-

48. Brathwaite, *Roots*, 275.

49. Part of the virtue of using the quatrain as a building block for a poem is its adaptability: in addition to the more typical forms of the ballad and the sonnet, myriad combinations of quatrains and couplets arise. The variety in *Harlem Shadows* is exhilarating: "Spring in New Hampshire" is a six-line ballad with a quatrain and a couplet; "The City's Love," "On Broadway," and "Harlem Shadows" bracket a single quatrain with two couplets; "Flame-Heart" has a stanza with two distinct quatrains and a final couplet, while "North and South" has four quatrains and a couplet; three poems are in couplets—"A Prayer," "Absence," and "Romance"—and one, "Flirtation," alternates *a* and *b* rhymes for eight lines. The rest are either sonnets or ballads, except for "When Dawn Comes to the City," which employs a complicated, canzone-like rhyme scheme in its second and fourth stanzas.

50. Caplan, *Questions of Possibility*, 111.

51. Jeff Hilson, ed., *Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (East Sussex: Reality Street, 2008), 8. See also Eavan Boland and Edward Hirsch, eds., *The Making of a Sonnet* (New York: Norton, 2008); and Stephen Burt and David Mikics, eds., *The Art of the Sonnet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

52. Burt and Mikics, *Art of the Sonnet*, 22.

ment denunciation of the sonnet as a modernist form: "Why not write sonnets? Because, unless the idea implied in the configuration can be deformed, it has not been *used* but copied. *All* sonnets mean the same thing because it is the configuration of the words that is the major significance. Because it is a configuration (the sonnet) whose meaning supersedes any idea that may be crammed into it. It is not an invention but anchors beyond the will—does not liberate the intelligence but stultifies it—and by its cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed."⁵³ The sonnet, Williams argues, contains a history in its form that extends "beyond the will"—beyond the ability of an individual to follow Pound's advice and "make it new."⁵⁴ In effect, the sonnet form is a signifier with a conventional signified, the relation to which neither content nor "apt use" can change.⁵⁵ Williams immediately contrasts Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) to the sonnet's conservative "configuration"; Stein, having removed "the burdensome configurations of grammar and rhythm," allows the mind to be "liberated to function in a new way—a pure pleasure in letters."⁵⁶ What Williams values is the dislocation of syntax, line, and meter, "the breakup of the language." The effect of Stein's writing is "to re-inkindle language," something that the sonnet, because of its established "configuration," cannot do. "We do not live in a sonnet world," Williams writes elsewhere.⁵⁷

But McKay did live in a sonnet world, and it is a world that his sonnets actively reconfigure. Moreover, "liberation" has far more than a formal sense in McKay's world, as the Christmas Rebellion and the Christmas poems insist. If some of McKay's titles in *Harlem Shadows* ("Hard Times," "North and South") point to his immersion in the realism of Dickens and Gaskell, the poems themselves combine the tragic depiction of everyday life with the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling—Stendhal and Balzac via Wordsworth and Coleridge. A moment of vision catalyzed by a scent, a flower, or a footstep gives way to a meditation on the material conditions of their production, growth, and circulation; the perfume "overwhelms and conquers," the flower "cannot bloom in this cold place," the feet "know no

53. William Carlos Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 17.

54. Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 620.

55. See also O. M. Brik: "Normally, the requirement of heightened semantics arises whenever life imposes new thematics and whenever the old verse forms are no longer capable of carrying the new thematics—a situation which develops because the old forms are inseparably linked to a set of semantics which has become irrelevant" ("Contributions to the Study of Verse Language," trans. C. H. Severens, in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska [Chicago: Dalkey Archive, 2002], 119).

56. Williams, *Embodiment of Knowledge*, 18.

57. Williams, quoted in Caplan, *Questions of Possibility*, 64.

rest.”⁵⁸ When read in the light of his earlier work, McKay's sonnets from *Harlem Shadows* represent not a retrenchment in Williams's sense of anti-modernist “configuration” but rather a conflation of the separate positions of the worker and the poet.

I turn now to one of McKay's sonnets to show how an understanding of his *Gleaner* poems recasts his later, more well-known sonnets from *Harlem Shadows*. Placed in the context of *Harlem Shadows* as a whole, the sonnet seems more a result of historical contingencies, more an “invention” than an ironclad “configuration.” “Jasmines,” a fifteen-line sonnet with an irregular rhyme scheme, was first published in 1921 in Max Eastman's radical magazine *The Liberator*.⁵⁹ A jasmine is a plant with a small white flower that can only grow in tropical climates; it would have been familiar to McKay not only from Jamaica but also through his two years of training in applied agriculture at Kansas State. While most of the lines of the sonnet are in pentameter, the poem begins with a shorter line that ends on the word “room”:

Your scent is in the room.
 Swiftly it overcomes and conquers me!
 Jasmines, night jasmines, perfect of perfume,
 Heavy with dew before the dawn of day!
 Your face was in the mirror. I could see
 You smile and vanish suddenly away,
 Leaving behind the vestige of a tear.
 Sad suffering face, from parting grown so dear!
 Night jasmines cannot bloom in this cold place;
 Without the street is wet and weird with snow;
 The cold nude trees are tossing to and fro;
 Too stormy is the night for your fond face;
 For your low voice too loud the wind's mad roar.
 But oh, your scent is here—jasmines that grow
 Luxuriant, clustered round your cottage door!⁶⁰

Jasmines, in the sonnet, are associated not only with luxuriance but also with subtlety: a “scent,” a “vestige,” a “low voice.” The enjambment of “luxuriant” highlights metrically and syntactically the first word of the line—a specific type of enjambment known in French lyric as the *rejet*.⁶¹ There is a certain luxuriance and subtlety in the architecture of the sonnet as a whole: in the slow expansion of line 3 from two to three to five syllables (“jasmines, night jasmines, perfect of perfume”); in the brimming first quatrain, which

58. The first and the third of these quotations are taken from “Jasmines”; the second, from “Harlem Shadows.” See McKay, *Complete Poems*, 192–93, 161–62.

59. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 337.

60. *Ibid.*, 192.

61. See Mary Lewis Shaw, *Cambridge Introduction to French Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19–20.

discovers its *b* rhyme only in line 5, one line later than a typical *abab* quatrain would have mandated; and, finally, in the latticework of similar sounds that binds together the end of nearly every line with the beginning of the next. The effect of these repeated sounds is to mitigate the closure of the end-stopped lines by echoing or wafting syllables across the end of one onto the other. In the final two lines, where the couplet should be, we find instead a surplus of couplets filling the first six syllables of the lines: “but oh, your scent / Luxuriant”; “is here / clustered.” Through McKay’s immersion in the sonnet tradition and his subtle manipulations of the schemes and tropes of the form—rather than through any explicit political commitment—he is able to make audible those voices that are too low and make visible those smiles that have left only the “vestige of a tear.” The ambiguous pronoun “your” in the first line of the poem seems to have two possible referents: the jasmynes themselves and the lover at the “cottage door.” Both are linked together with the speaker in a solidarity enhanced by the sonnet form. Reclaiming a native flower for an imperial tradition, the English sonnet itself becomes the “cold place” where McKay’s jasmynes should not be able to bloom—and yet, paradoxically, the only place they can.⁶²

I have attempted to show how McKay’s poems from the *Daily Gleaner* benefit from being explored within the context of his discordant roles as constable and poet; his Jamaican poems exemplify the “reciprocal deformation” and reformation that result from the dual adherence to Jamaican patois and the anglophone ballad and sonnet. In his “Author’s Word” from *Harlem Shadows*, McKay acknowledges the place of both “revolutionary passions” and “regular forms” in the social life of the community: McKay remembers

making up verses in the dialect and in English for our moonlight ring dances and for our school parties. Of our purely native songs the jammass (field and road), shay-shays (yard and booth), wakes (post-mortem), Anancy tales (transplanted African folk lore), and revivals (religious) are all singularly punctuated by meter and rhyme. And nearly all my own poetic thought has always run naturally into these regular forms.

Consequently, although very conscious of the new criticisms and trends in poetry, to which I am keenly responsive and receptive, I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods.⁶³

McKay’s constellation of “older traditions” and “lawless and revolutionary passions and moods” offers a different vision of what is possible than is nor-

62. As Herbert Tucker has pointed out to me, there are possible sources for McKay’s jasmynes in Milton’s “Lycidas,” Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” and Tennyson’s *The Princess*.

63. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 314–15.

mal for the poetry we think of as belonging to modernism. Deploying schemes of rhyme, refrain, and chiasmus in concert with the linguistic formations of Jamaican patois, McKay's poems map out the points of tension and contestation, as well as collusion and imbrication, between the language of a literary tradition and the spoken dialect of the prostitute, the policeman, and the lover at the "cottage door" in early twentieth-century Jamaica. In "Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957), Theodor Adorno describes a division in poetry between "dialect poetry" and "traditional lyric poetry." Dialect poetry, he argues, has a "collective force" that emerges from "the linguistic and spiritual rudiments of a not yet completely atomized tradition"; traditional lyric poetry, "as the strictest aesthetic negation of modern middle-class values," lacks that force. In his early poetry, and in his comments on his poetry, McKay finds the collective force of poetry to be at its strongest where dialect and traditional lyric meet and overlap.⁶⁴ Moreover, by establishing a continuum between the quatrains of the ballad and the sonnet, McKay imagines an alternative genealogy of the sonnet, which emerges not out of the Italian canzone, "the noblest of lyrics," but instead out of the ballad's political engagement, "simplicity of means," and "collective voice."⁶⁵ Just as McKay's early ballads attempt to superimpose the policeman and the poet, the modernist innovation of McKay's *Harlem Shadows* might be found in the tension between configuration and liberation, the factory and the olfactory, the burden of the field and the "burden" of the song.

III

By way of a brief coda, I want to return to Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, where McKay grew up, where part of his house, Sunny Ville, still stands, and where I recently found myself lost on an unmarked road near Claude McKay High School.⁶⁶ Winston "Son" Senior, who drives a taxi based in the inland town of Junction, had offered to take me around Clarendon, and as we drove out of the small fishing towns of the south coast and into the mountains, he pointed to the damage bauxite mining has done to the fields and crops. The bauxite plant in the shadow of Santa Cruz Mountain has been closed,

64. Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Telos* 20 (1974): 65. In this sense, McKay's poems perhaps effect what Jacques Rancière has called a "redistribution of the sensible," an aesthetic arrangement "that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (*Politics of Aesthetics*, 12).

65. See Paul Oppenheimer, "The Origin of the Sonnet," *Comparative Literature* 34 (1982): 289, 296.

66. Glennor Wilson, principal of Claude McKay High School, took time to speak to me about McKay, who is revered in Clarendon as "our Nelson Mandela."

Son explained, since 2009, leaving over two thousand full- and part-time workers unemployed.⁶⁷ Mining has so impoverished the soil that as we drove up Santa Cruz Mountain at the end of May, the fruit trees, in a part of the country that depends on the production of bananas and yams, were stunted, sometimes bare.

Richard Palmer, whom Son and I met when we asked for directions, has a house that practically fronts the Sukee River, which McKay memorialized in one of his earliest poems from the *Gleaner*. He agreed to lead us up the road to the steep driveway to McKay's house, where we found a new yellow building and the cement foundation of Sunny Ville. Next to the foundation, overgrown with the lanky white and yellow weeds called Spanish Needle, are the graves of Thomas and Hannah Ann, McKay's parents. Richard handed me a Spanish Needle and asked whether I knew the poem about it, which he began to recite from memory, cutting up the plant with his machete while he spoke:

Lovely dainty Spanish needle
 With your yellow flower and white,
 Dew bedecked and softly sleeping,
 Do you think of me to-night?⁶⁸

He stopped after two stanzas, embarrassed at the attention, with a self-deprecating "Oh, man, I know it too tough." "The Spanish Needle"—popular in Jamaican primary schools as a poem for children to memorize—is in a form recognizable to us from McKay's early work, the *abcb* tetrameter quatrain. The quatrain tropes a drama of departure and return in its rhyme scheme: the third line of each stanza strays from the first and second, while the fourth puts an end to the stanza's wandering. Yet the final closure of the rhyme is always at odds with the opening of the syntax into an unanswerable question, a question that might be rephrased in the following way: Where are the people, McKay asks, who gather the honey from the glades of the Muses—and how hard pressed are they to gather it?⁶⁹ The lyric is what makes their low voices heard.

67. See <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/bauxite/> for yearly statistics that match Son's firsthand account. From 2008 to 2009, bauxite mine production in Jamaica decreased 43 percent from 14 to 8 million dry metric tons.

68. McKay, *Complete Poems*, 163.

69. "For of course poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees" (Plato, *Ion*, trans. Paul Woodruff, in *Complete Works* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997], 942).