

“A love so fugitive and so complete”: Recovering the Queer Subtext of Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*

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In spite of its considerable influence on the Harlem Renaissance and the broader fields of African American and Caribbean literatures, Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows* (1922), as a cohesive whole, has remained relatively neglected. While selections of McKay’s so-called “violent sonnets” and nostalgic verse have been reproduced in various anthologies, his homoerotic love poems have been largely excluded.¹ Prior to the 2004 publication of *The Complete Poems: Claude McKay*, edited by William J. Maxwell, much of McKay’s poetry had fallen out of print, while *Harlem Shadows* had not been widely reprinted in its entirety since the 1920s (Maxwell, Introduction 25). In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay is considered both a forerunner and an outsider. His work significantly influenced a generation of Renaissance writers, most notably Langston Hughes, who wrote to McKay in 1925: “You are still the best of the colored poets and probably will be for the next century and for me you are the one and only.”² James Weldon Johnson described the publication of *Harlem Shadows* as “one of the great forces in bringing about . . . the Negro literary Renaissance” (266).³ Yet McKay was a marginal, radical figure—a “vagabond” poet who could never entirely embrace the literary elite that formed the foundation of the Harlem Renaissance canon (*Long Way* 4).⁴ Shortly after the publication of *Harlem Shadows*, McKay left America, travelling first to Russia and then throughout Europe and northern Africa. He lived abroad for more than a decade, prompting Alain Locke to name him the “unabashed ‘playboy’ of the Negro Renaissance,” accusing him of abandoning the burgeoning Renaissance through his “prolonged flight into expatriate cosmopolitanism and its irresponsible exoticism” (63–64). McKay’s “queer black transnationalist” sojourn eventually became an enforced exile; as a result of his political radicalism he was prohibited from returning to any part of the British Commonwealth in 1933, while “West Indians faced formidable difficulties when they appealed to gain entry into the United States—above all those who were known Communists” (*Code* 67).⁵ Finally, through the aid of James Weldon Johnson and Walter White, McKay returned to Harlem in 1934, severely ill and impoverished, to find the city drastically changed by economic depression. After a lifetime of social and political radicalism, he converted to

Catholicism in 1944. He spent his remaining years battling illness and teaching at Sheil School in Chicago, until his death in 1948, at the age of fifty-seven.

In keeping with McKay's partially closeted life, there remained until quite recently very little published biographical material directly concerning his sexuality, forcing queer criticism to rely heavily on archival material.⁶ Most recently, Gene Andrew Jarrett's introduction to his edition of McKay's memoir, *A Long Way from Home*, recognizes the significance of McKay's "sexual journeys" on his expatriate travels: "the homophobic criminalization of homosexuality in certain countries around the world dictated how, where, and why he travelled" (xxii). Gary Holcomb's timely study of McKay's "sexually dissident diaspora radicalism," *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2007), is a significant breakthrough in McKay studies, unveiling critical links between McKay's sexual and political subversions.⁷ However, in keeping with the phenomenon Michael L. Cobb refers to as "race criticism's sexuality amnesia," many of McKay's earlier critics and biographers demonstrated a tendency toward exclusion, ignoring McKay's sexuality altogether, or relegating it to a few brief pages (328). In his biographic study *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity*, Tyrone Tillery grudgingly acknowledges: "it must be admitted that McKay himself was bisexual" (12). An earlier biography by James Giles ignores the sexual implications of McKay's work entirely. Wayne Cooper, McKay's most comprehensive biographer to date, downplays the significance of sexuality in his otherwise exhaustive study: "Aside from the occasionally daring reference to homosexual love buried in his poetry, McKay rarely discussed homosexuality in his writings" (75). For the perceptive, knowing McKay reader, the naiveté of this statement cannot be overestimated. Collectively, these early refusals to address the impact of sexuality on McKay's body of work suggest a seemingly unspoken, perhaps unacknowledged, longstanding critical consensus to minimize the impact and significance of homoerotic themes in McKay's work.

While McKay's "violent sonnets" have overshadowed his erotic poetry, his status as a black radical has likewise eclipsed his significance as a queer black poet, with little critical consideration for the correlations between his political radicalism and homoeroticism.⁸ The heterocentricity of the majority of McKay scholarship is exemplified by the fact relatively few critics have, over a decade later, answered Gregory Woods's call for a queer "reappraisal" of McKay's poetry (127).⁹ Gary Holcomb has exposed the absence of critical attention to the relationship between McKay's politics and his sexuality: "Scholars currently treat McKay's radical politics and homoeroticism as if such aspects of his work and being never met" ("Diaspora" 715). McKay believed that black bourgeois critics such as W. E. B. Du Bois constructed "a peculiar racial opinion [that] constitutes a kind of censorship of what is printed about the Negro."¹⁰ Thus, for Renaissance writers like McKay, the representation of deviant sexualities constituted a form of protest against the constraints of writing as racial "propaganda."¹¹

The canonical marginalization of McKay's queer poetry casts him as a writer concerned predominately with race rather than sexuality, reminiscent of Essex Hemphill's description of the Langston Hughes's Estate as a "sacred closet" that seeks to suppress discussions of queer blackness (in reference to the Estate's interference in the Isaac Julien film *Looking for Langston*) (181). This exclusion has had a severe impact on McKay's readership and the reproduction of his poetry, privileging his "violent" protest poems over his more overtly queer poetry (Maxwell 21). As Siobhan Somerville notes, the "separation" of race and sexuality is "often unintentionally reproduced through anthologies" focusing only on racialized or sexualized bodies, and thus ignoring (whether accidentally or intentionally) the bodies upon and within which these categories of identity intersect (3-4). Thus, the limited scope of anthologies has had the effect of essentially quarantining, if not altogether banishing, representations of queer blackness. This is especially true of McKay; when the African American canon has (marginally) embraced him, McKay's work is primarily explored via its relation to distinctly represented categories of criticism: the African diaspora, post-colonialism, the Harlem Renaissance, Caribbean literature, radicalism and communism, to name a few. Only recently has criticism considered McKay's significance as a queer black poet, and a radical one at that.

In spite of the distinctly queer undercurrents throughout his work, McKay cultivated an air of ambiguity surrounding his sexuality; his texts are rich with encoded meanings and telling silences. In his memoir, *A Long Way from Home*, he dances artfully around the topic:

[S]ex was never much of a problem to me. I played at sex as a child in a healthy, harmless way. When I was seventeen or eighteen I became aware of the ripe urge of potency and also the strange manifestations and complications of sex. I grew up in the spacious peasant country, and although there are problems and *strangeness of sex* also in the country, they are not similar to those of the city. I never made a problem of sex. (188, emphasis mine)

McKay distances himself from association with the "strangeness of sex" by positioning the "peasant country" of his youth as distinct from the sexual "problems" of the city. Holcomb argues that McKay's autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, works on multiple levels of revelation and concealment: "it not only obscures and reveals his political past but also bares and buries his queer history" (*Code* 56). Similarly, much of McKay's poetry can be read as existing within the queer framework Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as the "glass closet," simultaneously divulging and withholding elements of the author's sexual subversion with a kind of wink-and-nod transparency. As Holcomb observes, "the text is, in Derridian terms, a writing that engages in the *erasure of clues*" (*Code* 34).¹²

I examine McKay's poetry via what Somerville terms an "intersectional" approach, exploring areas of convergence between race and sexuality (5). The vehemence of McKay's poetry of racial injustice parallels the sense of fervent longing and estrangement found in his homoerotic poems. McKay's queer poetry involves a flamboyant dalliance between secrecy and disclosure, navigating the border of permissible and forbidden desire. His poetic interrogation of the "barrier[s]" to queer desire not only parallels, but also intersects with, his poetry of rebellion against racial injustice.¹³ McKay employs evasion and *double entendre* alongside what Sedgwick describes as "the speech act[s] of silence," to construct a form of poetic protest that is more subtle, but no less powerful, than that of his "violent sonnets," constructing a veiled declaration that is inherently brave in its clarity, and intrinsically complex in its (open) secrecy.¹⁴ McKay's deliberate ambiguities and veiled innuendos, for all their tactics of subtlety and evasion, only serve to call attention to their (queer) subject. Perhaps not despite, but *because of* this encoded sexual subterfuge, his deliberate inclusion of homoerotic themes constitutes a barely closeted form of poetic protest: a refusal to conform the "burden of representation" placed upon the "Negro writer" to represent African Americans in the most conservative, formal, and reductive ways (Schwarz 133). McKay deliberately distanced himself from the literary promotion of the "genteel Negro" agenda (*Long Way* 321-22):

[I]t seems that respectable Negro opinion and criticism are not ready for artistic or other iconoclasm in Negroes. Between them they would emasculate the colored literary aspirant . . . [O]ur critics are apparently under the delusion that an Aframerican literature may be created out of evasion and insincerity. ("A Negro Writer to his Critics" 134)

McKay's refusal to succumb to this pressure is evident throughout his correspondence, essays, and memoirs, to the point of risking, and even at times sabotaging, his career.¹⁵ I argue that for McKay the sexual *is* political, and that his overt poetic homoeroticism cannot be read as anything less than an extension of his politics of refusal. The poems of *Harlem Shadows* reveal the complexity and depth of McKay's poetic oscillation between *in* and *out*, positioning him as a radical poet of dissent: political, racial, sexual, and all points in between.

"[S]acred cell[s]" and "secret place[s]": The Poetics of the Closet

In defense of the harsh critical reactions of the black bourgeois to his frank depictions of sexuality in *Home to Harlem*, McKay composed the essay "A Negro Writer to His Critics" (1932) in which he reflected on elitist critical "censorship": "I did not grow up in the fear of skeletons in the closet And I have often wondered why many subjects that seemed to me the most beautiful and suitable for literature . . . should be publicly shocking in print and taboo in art" (133, 136).

The sonnet "I Know My Soul" (1922) further interrogates McKay's wonderment at the constraints of representation within a closeted "place," constructing a queer metaphysical introspection contained within the Petrarchan sonnet form.

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,
 And held it to the mirror of my eye,
 To see it like a star against the sky,
 A twitching body quivering in space,
 A spark of passion shining on my face. (ll. 1-5)

The soul is initially cloistered in a "secret place," then removed from its protective interiority for the purpose of examination, gazed upon through the introspective "mirror" of the mind's "eye." Positioned before the viewer's gaze "like a star" "against" the backdrop of "the sky," the soul is exhibited as a sexualized entity: "a twitching body quivering in space" (ll. 1-5). The union of the closeted soul and the displayed body suggests a Whitmanian fusion of corporeality and spirituality: the "passion[ate]" "quivering" form is a reminder of physicality in the face of unfathomable space. The stated purpose of this metaphysical exploration is "to determine why / This awful key to my infinity / Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace" (ll. 6-7). While McKay's linguistic religiosity and his allusions to Christian "joy and grace" hint at his Baptist upbringing and foreshadow his later conversion to Catholicism, his resentment at the soul's "conspir[acy]" is ultimately overcome through the power of recognition.¹⁶ Yet this discovery is tantalizingly partial, offering only a glancing epiphany rather than a "full" "read[ing]."

And if the sign may not be fully read,
 If I can comprehend but not control,
 I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
 Because I see a part and not the whole.
 Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted
 By this narcotic thought: I know my soul. (ll. 9-14)

Amitai F. Avi-Ram suggests that the inner mechanisms of "sexual and racial prejudices" revolve around "attitude[s] toward the body: that the body has meaning, that it possesses a certain transparency as a sign, just like an ordinary word" (32). Humans then, are at the most reductive level categorized and "organized according to what appear to be visible and patent signs, bodily signs, which can easily be 'read' according to a code so standard and so universal that its rules hardly enter consciousness. Yet it is those very unconscious codes that are oppressive" (Avi-Ram 32). The inability of this soul to be "fully read" attests to its phantasmic powers of evasion and opacity: it may be "comprehend[ed]," but not "control[led]" (ll. 9-10). Its unreadability functions as a protective disguise, a defense against the prejudicial interpretations of outsiders. The final lines declare the eroticization of knowledge; solace is attained through the "narcotic thought" of recognition, lending a delirious quality to this introspection. The "totalizing knowledge-power" surrounding the soul assuages the ambiguity of its unreadable partiality (Sedgwick 164). The "strange[ness]" of "contemplation" is relieved by inherent knowing (l.

me),” queer nostalgia attempts to say, “I was there, *then* (you cannot erase my past).” This reclaiming and revision of the past is an attempt to gain empowerment and agency through recontextualization. Paradoxically, in choosing to compulsively remember and revisit the transient lover, the poet becomes a “ghost” himself, futilely pursuing the “fairy phantoms” of a recontextualized memory that can never be matched by reality (ll. 23-24).

**“Not mortal, a flower, a fairy”:
Anonymity, Neutrality and the “Glass Closet”**

Anonymity and gender ambiguity are perhaps the most obvious examples of McKay’s rhetorical construction of what Sedgwick refers to as a “glass closet” that both flaunts and protects its sexual subtext (164). This rhetorical oscillation between secrecy and disclosure is exemplified in the poem “To O.E.A.” (1920), the only one of the homoerotic love poems in *Harlem Shadows* to hint at the identity of the beloved. The use of gender-neutral pronouns guards the sexuality of the lovers, yet this vagueness alludes to something unspoken, which must be protected. The presence of initials in the title invites curiosity and speculation, yet the body of the poem returns to anonymity and gender neutrality cloaked in natural imagery:

Your voice is the color of a robin’s breast,
And there’s a sweet sob in it like rain –
still rain in the night.
Among the leaves of the trumpet-tree, close to his nest,
The pea-dove sings, and each note thrills
me with strange delight.
Like the words, wet with music, that well from your
trembling throat. (ll. 1-5)

The lover’s voice conjures the scarlet image of the “robin’s breast” and the “wet” sound of “still” rainwater (ll. 1-2). The synaesthesia of this red voice adds to the poem’s figural ambiguity, evoking a sense of emotional displacement, of “strange delight” (l. 4). Yet something is withheld; the presence of a “sob” caught in the “trembling throat” suggests something unsaid, something choked back (ll. 2-5). A sense of trepidation follows the lover’s gaze as his “searching” eyes pass “through” the poet (ll. 6-7):

I’m afraid of your eyes, they’re so bold,
Searching me through, reading my thoughts,
shining like gold.
But sometimes they are gentle and soft like dew on
the lips of the eucharis.
Before the sun comes warm with his lover’s kiss. (ll. 6-9)

The trickling effect of the lover’s voice does not extend to his sweeping gaze, which penetrates the mind, “reading” the poet’s guarded thoughts (l. 7). Yet the eyes are not entirely invasive; they are capable of “gentle” seduction (l. 8). The traditional masculine gendering of the sun offers dual interpretations: “his lover’s kiss” can be

read as the sun's kiss upon the "eucharis," or as the kiss of the masculine beloved (ll. 8-9). The final lines attempt a half-hearted denial of the beloved's corporeality, and thus the physicality of their "passion, that I feel is wrong!" (l. 13). Despite the poet's attempts to chasten his love by rendering the beloved immortal and, thus, incorporeal, the burden of "flesh" is inescapable; the love of men is the inevitable consequence of the "fairy[?]" beauty (l. 14):

Not mortal, a flower, a fairy, too fair for the
 beauty-shorn earth.
 All wonderful things, all beautiful things, gave of
 their wealth to your birth.
 Oh I love you so much, not recking of
 passion, that I feel it is wrong!
 But men will love you, flower, fairy, non-
 mortal spirit burdened with flesh,
 Forever, life-long. (ll. 11-15)

In contrast to the poem's gender neutrality, the word "fairy" alludes almost blatantly to same-sex desire. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "fairy" was used as slang for "a male homosexual" as early as the late nineteenth century, as in the *American Journal of Psychology* (1895): "This coincides with what is known of the peculiar societies of inverts . . . Balls, where men adopt the ladies' evening dress, are well known in Europe. 'The Fairies' of New York are said to be a similar secret organization." In Jazz Age Harlem, the "society" of "fairies" was no secret, perhaps the most ostentatious example being the Hamilton Lodge Ball. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, observers referred to Harlem's famous drag ball as "The Dance of the Fairies."¹⁷ Langston Hughes described the ball as "[the] strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles . . . the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedos and box-black suits" (226). George Chauncey's discussion of the historical use of the term "fairy" describes the gender-fluidity of this "secret society" as "constitut[ing] the primary image of the 'invert' in popular and elite discourse alike . . . at the center of the given cultural system by which male-male sexual relations were interpreted." Yet same-sex desire was only "one aspect of a much more comprehensive gender role inversion (or reversal)" which involved the adoption of effeminate modes of dress and manners (Chauncey 47-48). Fairies maintained a highly visible and recognizable presence in Harlem, appearing openly in the streets and nightclubs: "perhaps nowhere were more men willing to venture out in public drag than in Harlem" (Chauncey 249). A. B. Christa Schwarz observes that fairies themselves constituted a pleasure destination for white "exoticists." In addition to the varieties of entertainment on offer (in cafés, "black-and-tans," speakeasies, "rent parties" and "buffet flats"), it was relatively easy for men-seeking men to liaise with the "fairies" of Harlem (10-11).¹⁸ However, caution and evasion were necessary to avoid harassment and arrest. Despite its historical status as a gay enclave, jazz-age Harlem still contained many dangers for gay residents and visitors. Criminalization

existed in the form of the “degenerate disorderly conduct” charge used against gay men and lesbians fraternizing on the streets, gathering in public accommodations, “cruising,” and soliciting companionship (Chauncey 172-73). A 1927 investigator’s report to the Committee of Fourteen offered detailed descriptions of the patrons of a Harlem speakeasy, which included prostitutes and customers, both black and white, and “some fairies” (Mumford 80).

Specifically, McKay’s “flower, fairy, non-mortal spirit” could allude, especially in light of the queer connotations of the term “fairy,” to a specific *kind* of flower: a “pansy.” Returning to the OED, “pansy” was used as a colloquialism for “a male homosexual,” specifically “an effeminate man” as early as 1899. In what seems an impossible coincidence, the OED’s 1928 example of this usage is a passage from McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928): “All around the den, luxuriating under the little colored lights, the dark dandies were loving up their pansies.”¹⁹ Holcomb describes the figure of the “pansy” as “vital” to the history of Jazz Age Harlem, which was in the midst of its own “Pansy Craze” (“Diaspora” 721). Chauncey further emphasizes the use of the “flower” as a metaphor for effeminate males: “such men were often called *pansies*, and the names of other flowers such as daisy and buttercup were applied so commonly to gay men that they were sometimes simply called ‘horticulture lads’” (15). Thus, McKay’s use of these words in this context is almost certainly associated with same-sex desire, offering a winking nod to an openly “secret organization.” Just as Harlem’s “fairies” had to negotiate a cautious flamboyance to elude arrest and harassment, McKay employs an evasive but suggestive rhetoric to obscure his meaning from hostile readers, while remaining transparent to those “in the life.”²⁰

“Flower[s] of [‘fugitive’] Love”: The Landscape of Desire

Desire in *Harlem Shadows* is often manifested through the sexualization of landscape as it is inscribed upon the body of the lover, interrogating the relationship between embodiment and location, and convergent representations of “home”—both mnemonic and erotogenic. In “Flower of Love” (1922), the body is descriptively rendered through the ecology of the tropics, while desire is enacted upon and within the landscape and the body, constructing an erotic geomorphology in which the two become interchangeable: “The flower is blown, / The saffron petals tempt my amorous mouth, / The yellow heart is radiant now with dew” (ll. 4-5). McKay’s fusion of homoerotic desire with diasporic longing invests Eve Sedgwick’s conception of “erotic localization” with new meaning, inscribing the physicality of specific acts and bodies onto the hills, channels, waterways, and floras of his homeland (35). Corporeality and locality are inextricably linked in McKay’s poetic voice, inhabiting the intersection between place and desire: “Soft-scented, redolent of my loved South; / O flower of love! I give myself to you” (ll. 6-7). McKay localizes sexual acts within the specificity of place, embedding sexuality in the surrounding environment. Even in this eroticized locale, the lovers gravitate toward the privacy of an “unseen” bower (l. 11):

Uncovered on your couch of figured green,
 Here let us linger indivisible.
 The portals of your sanctuary unseen
 Receive my offering, yielding unto me.
 Oh, with our love the night is warm and deep!
 The air is sweet, my flower, and sweet the flute
 Whose music lulls our burning brain to sleep,
 While we lie loving, passionate and mute.
 (ll. 9-16)

The couch on which the lovers lie “uncovered” is “figured green,” alluding to the protective seclusion of a (tropical) pastoral bower (l. 9). Obscured within this “sanctuary unseen,” the lovers’ “brain[s]” are “lull[ed]” by the curious, non-diegetic “music” of the “flute” (ll. 11-14). Safe within the figural bower, their minds are seduced by eerie, disembodied music, while their bodies “lie loving, passionate and mute” (l. 16). This correlation between the act of sex and being rendered mute involves the rhetorical construction of what Sedgwick describes as the “speech act of silence:” an interrogation of the inability to speak, at least directly and openly, about certain acts (3).

This link between “passion” and “mute[ness]” reappears in “A Memory of June” (1920) as the poet seeks privacy within the cityscape, entering a state of erotic remembrance, of “gleaming” streets, “tender rain” and “pulsing” bodies (ll. 5-9). It is a transitory scene, marking the movement not only from present into past, but also from the public, exterior space of the street toward the private interiority of the bedroom. This is a gradation of recollection and seduction, a wandering foreplay. The lovers’ “wet” footsteps move toward “home:” the scene of a “love” so evocative that every June is haunted by it (l. 7). McKay’s conception of “home” is more than a fixed location or a point of origin; it is an interior, eroticized space. As Justin D. Edwards observes, “McKay chooses to present ‘home’ as a sexualized space where all desires and appetites may be satisfied” (157).

Where in the starlit stillness we lay mute,
 And heard the whispering showers all night long,
 And your brown burning body was a lute
 Whereon my passion played his fevered song.

When June comes dancing o’er the death of May,
 With scarlet roses staining her fair feet,
 My soul takes leave of me to sing all day
 A love so fugitive and so complete.
 (ll. 13-20)

The lovers are situated in a nocturnal urban setting, a “little room” that is transformed into the pastoral *mis-en-scène* of an ephemeral “wed[ding],” “for one night only” (ll. 9-12). Although they are rendered “mute,” their acts are represented as auditory through music. The “burning body” of the beloved is phallically figured as

“a lute” on which their “fevered song” is “played” out (ll. 14-15). Even in nostalgic recollection, the details of the encounter are not remembered in the mind: the “soul takes leave” of the self to pay homage to “[a] love so fugitive and so complete” (l. 20). The “fugitive” nature of this love furthers the elements of subversion and evasion within the poem, suggesting the lovers’ linguistic and literal hypervigilance.

McKay’s tendency to correlate sexuality, orality, and location recurs in “A Red Flower” (1922), as the beloved’s lips are likened to the petals of a lily, the catalyst for a fantastic sojourn *into* the exotic landscape through the lover’s mouth:

Your lips are like a southern lily red,
 Wet with the soft rain-kisses of the night,
 In which the brown bee buries deep its head,
 When still the dawn’s a silver sea of light.
 (ll. 1-4)

The phallic image of the bee probes the “wet” floral mouth of the lover (l. 2). The function of the erubescant mouth then moves beyond seduction to a form of poetic outing, revealing the “dark delicious” secret of the beloved’s “soul”: “A mystery of life, the flaming goal / I seek through mazy pathways strange and new” (ll. 6-8). The lips become “the red symbol of a dream,” the gateway to an ephemeral blending of exoticism and sexuality, returning in the final stanza to the initial pollination metaphor (l. 9):

O were I hovering, a bee, to probe
 Deep down within your scented heart, fair
 flower,
 Enfolded by your soft vermilion robe,
 Amorous of sweets, for but one perfect hour!
 (ll. 17-20)

The orality of the first stanza—the figuration of the beloved’s lips as a portal into “mazy pathways,” offering the “essence that is you”—has taken a circuitous journey south, toward the “scented heart” of this “flower” (ll. 6-8, 18). The bee no longer penetrates the mouth’s petals, but seeks to “probe / Deep down within” (ll. 17-18). The poem’s “erotic localization” has descended from the “southern lily red” lips of the beloved to “probe” the anal imagery of the “scented heart,” “[e]nfolded by your soft vermilion robe” (ll. 1, 17-19). The fantasy becomes a nostalgic inscription, rewriting “home” upon the body, thereby re-inserting the exile “within” his estranged homeland through the dual penetrations: ecological and sexual (l. 18). Following his detainment in 1933 by colonial authorities in Tangier as a “Communist revolutionary,” McKay was prevented from traveling to any part of the British Commonwealth, including his native Jamaica (Holcomb, *Code* 67). McKay also faced significant difficulty in returning to the United States as a result of his leftist alliances and time spent in Russia.²¹ Nevertheless, as Holcomb argues, “[p]rohibiting him from going back to Jamaica bodily did not mean . . . that he could be prevented from returning textually” (*Code* 67).²² This corporeal-geographic

reunion seeks to satisfy both erotic lust and diasporic longing; “for but one perfect hour” the wandering restlessness of dual exile is abated through the metaphor of sexualized return (20).

Cruising Intersections: The Convergence of Race and Sexuality

Kevin J. Mumford has traced the social history of “interzones,” sites of black/white sexual relations, which he posits as central to an understanding of sexuality in American modernity. Urban spaces such as Harlem, Greenwich Village, and Chicago’s Towertown existed as points of “intersection within the interzones”—enclaves in which homosexual subcultures and black/white sex districts merged (78). Race and sexuality intersect as overlapping “barrier[s]” that block the lovers’ union in the dual sonnets of “One Year After” (1922). The exact nature of these “barrier[s]” remains obscure until the first sonnet’s turn reveals a violation of the miscegenation taboo; yet the hanging denouement suggests that another, mirror “barrier” still exists:

The barrier that loomed between to prove
The full supreme surrendering of me.
Oh, I was beaten, helpless utterly
Against the shadow-fact with which I strove.
For when a cruel power forced me to face
The truth which poisoned our illicit wine,
That even I was faithless to my race
Bleeding beneath the iron hand of thine,
Our union seemed a monstrous thing and base!
I was an outcast from thy world and mine. (ll. 1.5-14)

This convergence is heightened as the distinction between the “barrier[s]” becomes increasingly blurred, calling to mind Judith Butler’s exploration of the intersection of racialized and sexualized bodies in the context of queering: “As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, ‘queering’ works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race” (176). The pregnant suspense of the sonnet’s first ten lines invites queering, forcing speculation on the nature of the vague “shadow-fact” that perverts this “poignant love” into seeming “a monstrous thing” (ll. 1.6-13). Even when “race” is named as the source of the lovers’ “poison,” the lingering hints at queer love do not dissipate (ll. 1.10-11). The second sonnet, with its juxtaposition of homoerotic and exilic imagery, furthers this duality, focusing on rebellion and refusal. The embittered “outcast” is recast as an “adventure-seasoned” wanderer, while the restrictive “barrier[s]” are reconsidered: “The zest of life exceeds the bound of laws” (ll. 2.1-3). Yet the “terror” evoked through “gales of tropic fury” signifies that the violent power of these “barrier[s]” has not diminished (ll. 2.4-6). The storm evokes sexualized fear, while its afterglow brings contemplation and reflection. The respite is only temporary, however, as the wanderer soon resumes

his “risky ways.”

But when the terror thins and, spent, withdraws,
 Leaving me wondering awhile, I pause--
 But soon again the risky ways I tread!
 No rigid road for me, no peace, no rest,
 While molten elements run through my blood;
 And beauty-burning bodies manifest
 Their warm, heart-melting motions to be wooed;
 And passion boldly rising in my breast,
 Like rivers of the Spring, lets loose its flood. (ll. 2.6-14)

What was previously described as “monstrous” and “base” has been reconsidered as something involving risk (ll. 1.13-14). The implication is not one of inherent malevolence, but of external threat. The restless traveler continues to cruise, aroused by fantasies of “beauty-burning bodies” beckoning seductively “to be wooed.” Passion once again rises, culminating in the ejaculatory image of flooding rivers, cooling the beautiful “burning bodies” with rushing water.

The delicate balance between secrecy and recognition is the theme of “Courage” (1922), which charts the traversal from silence to collective understanding. McKay interrogates the dualities of exile and desire through the metaphor of a diasporic “guarded life.”

O lonely heart so timid of approach,
 Like the shy tropic flower that shuts its lips
 To the faint touch of tender finger tips:
 What is your word? What question would you broach?

Your lustrous-warm eyes are too sadly kind
 To mask the meaning of your dreamy tale,
 Your guarded life too exquisitely frail
 Against the daggers of my warring mind. (ll. 1-8)

The “lonely heart” is struck mute by the presence of an unknown other, “shut[ting] its lips” against “question[ing]” that might reveal its secrets (1-4). The beloved’s “lustrous eyes” unveil their hidden “meaning”; his silence is too “frail” to withstand the poet’s intuitive “daggers,” which conquer the “guarded life” through the power of the sexually clairvoyant gaze (ll. 5-8). The lovers are then figured as kindred exiles wandering through a barren landscape:

There is no part of the unyielding earth,
 Even bare rocks where the eagles build their
 nest,
 Will give us undisturbed and friendly rest. (ll. 9-11)

This diasporic traversal of “the unyielding earth” contrasts sharply with the exoticism and nostalgia of most of McKay’s love poetry, though he often describes the city of New York in similarly bleak imagery (9).²³ The lovers’ restlessness as they navigate the desolate landscape echoes the gay cruise through the city streets,

also a drifting search for “undisturbed and friendly rest” (11). The significance of wandering and the power of the gaze to unmask a “guarded life” are reminiscent of Joseph Boone’s description of “cruising” within urban enclaves as “creating spontaneous intersections of covert glances and direct looks as often as one crosses and recrosses the maze of the streets” (213). Like the wandering lovers, cruisers negotiate a hostile environment, in which the knowing glance acts as a watchword, an indication of belonging:

But in the socket-chiseled teeth of strife,
That gleam in serried files in all the lands,
We may join hungry, understanding hands,
And drink our share of ardent love and life. (ll. 13-16)

The sense of imminent danger and rebellion is enhanced by the militant image of “files” of dissident exiles. Yet there is the possibility of union with the camaraderie of outcasts for whom silence speaks volumes. The politics of oppression and exclusion are momentarily eclipsed as the imagery of resistance turns inward, towards the discovery of an enclave of kindreds, with whom it is possible to share “ardent love and life” (l. 16).

Harlem Shadows is a unique example of both the discursive and restrictive powers of the closet. When reading McKay, what is left *out* (all puns intended) is often as seductive and intriguing as that which is permitted to remain, haunted by, in the words of Willa Cather, “the presence of the thing not named” (50).²⁴ McKay’s poetry straddles the border of privacy and publicity, inhabiting the space of Sedgwick’s “glass closet” in which meaning is knowingly and protectively concealed from hostile readers, while vague transparency invites speculation on and interrogation of its (open) secrets from perceptive kindreds (164). McKay’s preference for traditional poetic form constructs a space of “guarded” seclusion through the “sacred cell” of poetry, in which disclosure is moderated by the constraints of form (“Memorial” l. 1, “Courage” l. 7). McKay’s Preface to *Harlem Shadows* sheds further light on his use of traditional form to control and restrain his poetics of dissidence and revelation: “I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods” (20). McKay seems to suggest that these “older traditions” are adequate *because* they are able to contain the “lawless” “passions,” which otherwise might consume both poem and poet. Avi-Ram has interrogated the inherently problematic critical tendency to misread “the apparent ‘conventionality’ of certain poetic forms as . . . signs of the poems’ political conservatism, in much the same way as people continue unconsciously to read certain meanings into the signs of race and sex” (32). As Maxwell argues, McKay’s penchant for traditional form is “not just a coat of American whiteface,” but rather a subversive reclamation and reworking of formal poetic structures to meet his own, “revolutionary” aims. The relative absence of attention to the homoerotic elements of these poems attests to the author’s success in concealing their meanings from aversive readerships, while McKay’s mastery

of muted flamboyance elicits delightful recognition from *knowing* readers. While McKay's "violent" sonnets address issues of racial injustice, his love poetry illuminates the oppressive silence of a "guarded life" ("Courage" l. 7). He interrogates the "barrier[s]" to queer love through a poetic discourse that is both "passionate and mute" ("One Year After" l. 1.5, "Flower of Love" l. 16).

Notes

1. As William J. Maxwell observes, "McKay's 'violent sonnets' have dominated talk of his importance to African American literature" (21). For example, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) contains seven of McKay's "violent" protest poems, yet none of his love poetry. *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000) offers selections of McKay's protest poems, nostalgic verse, and Harlem-vogue verse, but again excludes his love poetry. However, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (2001) offers a reasonable cross-section of McKay's work, including one of his homoerotic love poems.
2. Hughes's letter to McKay, July 25, 1925, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
3. For overviews of McKay's impact on the Harlem Renaissance see Cooper, Holcomb, Jarrett, Pederson, and Wintz.
4. McKay remained ambivalent about the machinations of the "Harlem elite" throughout his career. Writing of his estrangement from the intelligentsia, McKay observed: "I was surprised when I discovered that many of the talented Negroes regarded their renaissance more as an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of Negro society" (*Long Way* 307, 321).
5. See Gary Holcomb's *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha* (63 - 67). Further references to this book will use the abbreviation *Code*.
6. His correspondence remains largely unpublished, archived in manuscript libraries and private collections, predominately the Harold Jackman, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay Papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; also the Miscellaneous Claude McKay Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library and the private collections of the Max Eastman Papers and the William Aspenwall Bradley Papers (Cooper 426). I am particularly grateful to the Beinecke Library, Yale University, for their assistance in my ongoing research on McKay.
7. While Holcomb discusses much of McKay's queer verse, particularly his early Jamaican dialect poems and those written during his travels, his primary focus is McKay's prose and fiction works.
8. For a further exploration of the ways in which McKay's "leftism merged with his sexual difference" (56), see Chapter Two, "The 'Distilled Poetry' of Queer Black Marxism in *A Long Way From Home*," in Holcomb's *Code*.
9. I am particularly indebted to Gary Holcomb's *Code* and his earlier article "Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay's *A Long Way*

from *Home*,” both of which highlight the correlations between McKay’s sexuality and his political radicalism. A. B. Christa Schwarz’s groundbreaking study, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, has been integral to this project, particularly in relation to McKay’s expression of “the burden of representation and sexual dissidence.” George Chauncey’s work has also been an invaluable resource.

10. McKay firmly opposed the pressure that black bourgeois critics like Du Bois placed on the “talented tenth” to pursue art as racial “propaganda” (“A Negro Writer to his Critics” 133).

11. See Schwarz’s chapter “Writing in the Harlem Renaissance: The Burden of Representation and Sexual Dissidence” (25-47).

12. In this instance, Holcomb is referring to *A Long Way from Home*, but I find the argument equally relevant to *Harlem Shadows*.

13. “The Barrier” and “One Year After” both refer to interracial sexuality.

14. According to Sedgwick, “closetedness” is “itself a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence” (3). In relation to the phenomenology of the closet, Sedgwick refers to D. A. Miller’s conception of an “open secret” (164, 67).

15. Two significant examples of McKay’s critical temper concern Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. When editing the *New Negro*, a collection of black poetry and prose, Locke changed the title of McKay’s poem “The White House” to “White Houses,” which reduced the poem, in McKay’s opinion, to “cheap, flat Afro-American propaganda.” Du Bois angered McKay when he published several of his poems without permission in the same issue of *Crisis* in which Du Bois had written a vitriolic review of *Home to Harlem*. McKay’s letters to Locke and Du Bois are published in Cooper’s *The Passion of Claude McKay*.

16. McKay was raised in a strict Christian household; his father was a deacon at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church near their farm in Sunny Ville, Jamaica (Cooper 8).

17. Although accounts differ as to whether “female impersonators” were present from the ball’s establishment in 1869, by 1926 a newspaper reported that at least half of the attendees were “fairies.” The popularity of the ball grew throughout the 1920s and 30s, and it eventually became known as the “Faggot’s Ball” (Chauncey 257-59). For a further discussion of the Hamilton Lodge Ball see Miller.

18. “Black-and-tans” (racially-mixed night clubs), “rent parties” (gatherings organized by tenants who charged entrants in order to “make rent”), and “buffet flats” (private apartments that doubled as entertainment spots) were often safe havens for gay men and lesbians as well as interracial couples (Schwarz 10-11).

19. The OED online does not attribute this quote directly to McKay, but to an entry in the *J. N. Katz Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (1983). The original quote appears in *Home to Harlem* (30).

20. Harlem residents who frequented speakeasies, “buffet flats,” “rent parties,” and the like (including prostitutes, gamblers, lesbians, gay men and other “disreputable folk”) were participants in what they called “the sporting life” or simply “the life” (Chauncey 249).

21. McKay’s correspondence, primarily with James Weldon Johnson and Max

Eastman, discusses his difficulties in returning to the United States. Johnson made entreaties with the Assistant Secretary of State on McKay's behalf in 1928, and obtained a letter from the Assistant Secretary to the Consul General at Marseilles regarding McKay's return (Johnson to McKay, February 27, 1928). While Johnson's letter to McKay of September 19, 1929, indicates that McKay did take up the matter with Consulate, he did not return to the states until 1934. Still wary of the institutionalized racism he had experienced in America, McKay was reluctant to return (*Code* 67). Johnson's letter to Eastman, June 2, 1933, indicates that McKay faced greater reentry difficulties at that time: "I am afraid that at the present time it will be more difficult to get special consideration for him than it was several years ago. The immigration laws and limitations on quotas are now much stricter." Finally, "knowing he could no longer set foot in any part of the British Commonwealth," McKay was essentially forced to petition for permission to return to the United States, and succeeded with the assistance of Johnson and Walter White (*Code* 67). Correspondence courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

22. For further details on McKay's detainment in Tangiers and subsequent exile from the Commonwealth, see Holcomb's *Code* (65-67).

23. For examples of McKay's descriptions of industrialization and New York City, see: "When Dawn Comes to the City," "Subway Wind," "The Tired Worker," and "Dawn in New York" in *Harlem Shadows*.

24. Previously cited by Somerville (6).

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