Marcellus Blount: On "If We Must Die"

Many of McKay's published sonnets betray the terms of his search for an ideal racial self. He fixes his own dilemma in the context of the black man's insistent quest for racial authority. Feeling his own increasing burdens as a representative of the race in literature, he engenders himself as a black man who speaks for his race in general and to other black men in particular. His most famous sonnet, "If We Must Die," demonstrates the tension between racial and gendered utterances. The poem presents a traditional ideal of black masculinity:

"If we must die
O kinsmen!"

Written in 1919, in the wake of the Red Scare and the Red Summer of race riots throughout the urban centers of the United States, "If We Must Die" is McKay's bold statement of a masculine, racial strategy. The nobility of his chosen form reaffirmed the conventions of dignity and the structures of address to which the poem's personae aspire. Etched into the consciousness of literate black Americans for generations to come as a model of Afro-American heroism, this poem has become a point of reference for the entire racial experience and a touchstone of the Afro-American entry into subjectivity. As Winston Churchill used it as a rallying cry to call the British into sustained battle against the Nazis, this single poem of renunciation earned McKay an international reputation even beyond his race.

While they speak for the entire race, the militant selves of the poem are in fact explicitly "male." The phrase "If we must die" utters the poem's call to participation, and it gathers meaning through its repetition in the first and second quatrains. The phrase "O kinsmen!" makes that call to participation explicit; the poem's would-be warriors are men. McKay fails to explicate the unique position of women within this embattled black community, choosing instead to talk about the race by imagining the aspirations of black men. The contest for black humanity in the poem is waged exclusively through the battle for black masculinity. Within the poem's rhetoric of pursuing honor and dignity, maleness is one of the spoils of the racial battle. In relation to white men, it is the ultimate mark of heroism. Whatever the position of women, for McKay this battle is between men.

Following Dunbar's footsteps by placing Afro-Americans in the heroic sonnet, McKay is the first to represent a collective Afro-American self within the slender technical boundaries of the sonnet form. In "If We Must Die," McKay gives public voice to other black men who might speak privately for all black people. The poem enacts McKay's powerful struggle for a masculine identity as a black writer in the midst of racial oppression. From the vantage point of his vocation as black writer, he turns to language to relieve the dissonance of his perception of what his life has become upon emigrating from Jamaica and his realization that his native culture of class distinction and apparent civility has ill prepared him for the viciousness of the racism that surrounded him daily. In the poem, McKay ultimately retreats to the social order of his youth with its values of personal honor. Death might come, be it not "inglorious."
"If We Must Die" builds its contrasts not between man and woman but rather man and beast, both terms variously construed. In an essay entitled "A Negro Poet Writes," the Jamaican-born McKay had written earlier of his initiation into American racism: "I ceased to think of people and things in the mass?why should I fight with mad dogs only to be bitten and probably transformed into a mad dog myself?" The resonant figures of bestiality here and in the poem underscore the extent to which McKay was haunted by the terms of his own dehumanization: the hostility and "ignoble cruelty" of what he witnessed in the United States. With his sense of nobility, McKay inherits a good deal of what Wayne Cooper, McKay's biographer, calls "the heroic sentimentalism of Victorian England." British imperialism left its mark on the British West Indies in many ways, and clearly McKay's experience of transplanted Victorian culture informed his writing. In part through his "special friendship" with his British patron, Walter Jekyll, he learned to internalize Victorian myths about male behavior in an aristocratic society. The sonnet form becomes an appropriate battlefield for the contest between McKay's sense of himself as a gentleman and the need to respond to racial violence. The gentlemanly form of the sonnet girds the language of warfare within the codes of nineteenth-century combat. Such codes allow McKay to fight racism on his own terms. With its heroic sentimentality, "If We Must Die" is for McKay the black male "deathblow" that will assure his possession of the rigid ideal of masculinity that comes as the poem's prize.