Consumption: Devouring "The Harlem Dancer"

Youth and sex characterize the Harlem Dancer?s audience: the "[a]pplauding youths," the "young prostitutes," the "bold-eyed boys," and simply, "the girls [my italics]." The speaker of the poem doesn?t seem to belong to or identify with any of these groups, separating himself from their juvenility, their undisguised lust for the dancer (which seems to frighten or dismay the poet), and even perhaps from their designation by gender; the speaker distinguishes himself from the rest of the audience by not gendering himself within the poem. Instead, he identifies himself and the dancer with blackness, and draws a charmed circle around the two of them by virtue of their shared race. She sings a gospel, spiritual or jazz song; McKay, alone among the white folks slumming in Harlem, sees in that the codes of a common history. The poem explicitly codes the dancer female, however, and its rhetoric emphasizes her sexuality and its effect on the audience. McKay and the dancer may be on the porch together, telling stories and signifying to one another about their passage through the storm, but the dancer?s gender in combination with her race changed the course of her passage. The storm she passed through has invested her with a double consciousness, informed not only by her race but also by her gender.

McKay deliberately takes the position of the outsider in this Harlem scene. He is neither male nor female, nor young, like the boys, the prostitutes, or the girls. Something else besides the dancer?s sensuality moves his fascination with her, or so he would prefer us to believe. Unresolved oppositions in the descriptive rhetoric of the poem call this subject position into question; the speaker distances himself madly ? too insistently ? from the "passionate," devouring boys and girls. This fringe position allows him to view the scene from on high (morally speaking), but in the context of the poem, the speaker has exclusive access to the dancer?s psyche. He alone knows what she is thinking, and that she doesn?t belong where she is right now. The notes McKay makes on her performance contribute to the idea that a sexualized interpretation (the reaction of the rest of her audience) is un-called for or inappropriate: "she seemed a proudly-swaying palm" (7), she danced "gracefully and calm" (5). McKay emphasizes her nobility and grace, not her sexuality.

The way he describes the dancer, in lines 5 and 6, is intended to de-sexualize her and/or to de-exoticize her. "She sang and danced on gracefully and calm/The light gauze hanging loose about her form" turns around the image of the half-clothed, semi-savage exotic in the second line. But lush, tropical imagery returns in the next line, comparing the dancer to a "proudly-swaying palm." In fact, it?s hard to reconcile the juxtaposition of these two descriptions with one narrative speaker ? unless the anxiety present is part of his character, a testament to the dancer?s stirring sexuality. He can?t help himself. Though the speaker wants to distance himself from the rest of the audience, he ends up identifying with them in that respect, both holding back from the objectification of the dancer and participating in it.

The boys and even the girls, however, "devour" the dancer with their gaze. The fact that even the girls are watching the dancer with hunger in their eyes suggests a number of things: 1) that girls, who would not "normally" be watching another woman with lust, are drawn to this one ? perhaps because of something in her or about her that draws them, but possibly 2) because their sexual or gender (or both) identities, as a part of the Harlem dancer?"
audience, are placed in imperfect service of McKay’s racially motivated poetics. Line 1 and
line 11 are nearly parallel in content: a description of boys in the audience, then a description
of girls in the audience. First, in line 1, the boys are a monolith and the girls are a separate
mass. The boys take the action: they are the subjects of this sentence and they "watc[h] her
perfect, half-clothed body sway." In line 11, the boys and the girls fuse into one watching
body, the gaze of which is juxtaposed to the poet-speaker’s genuine racial vision. The
audience’s gaze is clearly sexual and possessive; the speaker, on the other hand, is
interested in the dancer’s "self" rather than her body. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable
sexuality gets conflated with race, another example of the exoticizing of the dancer. In order to
emphasize this distinction between white representations or imaginings of black sexuality
and the distance that comes with the speaker’s invocation of African-American history, the
boys and the girls become genderless. They possess this passionate gaze regardless of their
particular fulfillment of gender roles.

McKay finds these boys and girls invasive. This audience may be invading in a different way,
however; they may be white folks slumming it in a Harlem nightclub, soaking in black culture
as they might take in the totem poles uptown at the Museum of Natural History. In contrast to
the audience’s misinterpretation of the dancer, the speaker identifies his personal knowledge
of the dancer with blackness: "Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes/Blown by black
players upon a picnic day [my italics]"; "Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls/Luxuriant
fell." Only he notices these things, he would say, just as only a black flautist could interpret the
voice of a black singer. She is "lovelier for passing through a storm," presumably America’s
storm of racial oppression. Nobody knows the troubles she’s seen, and still sees as she
distances herself from that strange place; nobody knows, that is, but the black man watching
from the seat in the back of the club. Her beauty, expressly linked in the mind of the speaker
to the experience of blackness (the same history which fuels McKay’s more racially polemical
poems), moves him not to passion but to idealization.

The tension between these two visions of the dancer? as Madonna and as whore? splits the
consciousness of the poem. The dancer is alternately exoticized by the young, hot-blooded,
wine-flushed members of the audience, and idealized by McKay as a pure representation of
his kind of beauty. A collection of phrases from Hughes? "Mulatto" elaborate on that history;
the historical precedent and the danger underlying the "devouring" gaze of the white boys and
girls comes into focus. A gaze implies power, and a certain level of coercion? an awareness
of the rules overseeing bodies (especially black bodies) and self-government according to
those rules. The dancer’s self “was not in that strange place”: it is, in fact, equally in this one:

    What’s a body but a toy?    Juicy bodies    Of nigger wenches    Blue black
    Against black fences? What’s the body of your mother? (11-15, 19)

The dancer, the poem implies, cannot take responsibility for the expectations placed upon her
by her white audience. Any reading of her sexuality as exotic, overpowering, and
uncontrollable, and thus fascinating to boys and even girls automatically contains and ignores
this version of history which McKay is party to. The poem addresses the hegemonic fear of
and fascination with the "other" by way of a speaker who isn’t exactly one of "us," but isn’t
exactly othered either. The poem sexualizes the co-opting of black experience and black art
by white people looking for novelty, characterizing it as a kind of cultural rape.

McKay frequently reworks the sonnet form to express racial rage, most memorably in poems
like "Mulatto" and "The White City." Where the boys and girls of "The Harlem Dancer" read their representations of Africa and black female sexuality on to the dancer?s body, McKay takes the body of the sonnet ? a privilege-soaked, white-identified form ? and uses it to insert "Afric?s son" into Shakespeare?s mode of discourse. The sonnet, then, serves as "high talk," speaking with Old Massa?s voice to lull him into believing in his slaves? perfect assimilation. It could be (and has historically been) dismissed as apery, but that would be done at peril when it comes to McKay:

Think you I am not fiend and savage too? Think you I could not arm me with a gun And shoot down ten of you for every one Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?" ("To the White Fiends, 1-4)

"The Harlem Dancer," though, doesn?t summon up this characteristic rage, though it does turn around the sonnet form in provocative ways. If it is a love sonnet to the dancer?s eyebrows, it does also contain the cultural history of rape, and in that way subverts the sonnet form. It may parenthetically allude to the cultural history of rape, and in that way subverts the sonnet form. The place is at once strange and familiar.

The boys and the girls are differentiated, however ? not in their deployment of the gaze, but in their representation within the poem. The youths in the first line applaud; they act at first, before the girls, by watching the dancer. The girls are at first described as prostitutes; they do not act, are not granted any verbs, in the beginning of the poem. When the description becomes more vivid in line 11 ? the boys are "wine-flushed, bold-eyed" ? the girls are merely "girls," with no descriptors attached. There?s a hierarchy of description of gender in the poem, and I would argue, an intentionally deconstructive one: the boys and girls appear to be as one in their objectification of the dancer, but there is also a second layer of objectification relating to the "young prostitutes." The girls and boys of the audience fuse into one at points in the poem; however, at other points the poem?s rhetoric differentiates them. Even boys and girls, united in their gaze, visually re-enacting a rape, are still boys and girls. Surprise must still be expressed at the queering of the girls? reaction to the dancer; the girls are prostitutes, defined in the poem by their sexual servitude. In the end, then, McKay can?t be comfortable with reading the dancer solely as fellow sufferer in America?s storm. In addition to the dancer?s blackness, she carries the additional burden of being a sexual object, blue-black against a black fence.

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The Harlem Dancer

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