Felipe Smith: On "The White City"

The work of Du Bois and Johnson undoubtedly set the tone for the imagery of entrapment and despair in the northern metropolis that permeates the poetry of Jamaican-born Claude McKay, an immigrant like Du Bois and Johnson in the American city famed for its "openness" to outsiders. McKay reached New York in spring 1914, already embittered by two years in the South and Midwestern plains of Kansas over the cruel race prejudice for which his Jamaican upbringing had not prepared him. In "The White House," the poem that occasioned McKay's vilification of Alain Locke, McKay's Marxist critique envisions Du Bois's "Great I Will" as a national space enclosed against black male aspiration. In this poem, the "door" shut against the "tightened face" of the "chafing savage" forces him to "keep [his] heart inviolate/Against the potent poison of your hate." McKay complained that Locke had changed the title of the poem to "White Houses" without consulting him, in fear that the original title "The White House" would be misconstrued as a criticism of the president, thereby jeopardizing McKay's ability as a resident alien to return to the country from Europe. In his autobiographical A Long Way from Home, McKay gives some insight into the whiteness of the enclosed spaces of his poetic landscape: "My title was symbolic," he says, "not meaning specifically the private homes of white people, but more the vast modern edifice of American industry from which Negroes were effectively barred as a group." Locke, said McKay, distorted the meaning of the poem,"making it appear as if the burning desire of black malcontent was to enter white houses in general." When McKay looked to Africa as a possible refuge, he found a still colonized African body politic the plaything of the modern white nations. "The sciences were sucklings at thy breast," McKay exclaims in "Africa." Yet despite Africa's history as the mother of all civilization, it had since been "Swallowed" by "darkness" and now has become "the harlot, . . . Of all the mighty nations of the sun." Like Johnson before him, McKay's despair emerges as disbelief in the millenarian triumph of Du Bois's Mother Africa, a view that not even his later visit to Africa would materially alter.

Looking no further than the possibility of a perpetual torture in America that perversely bestows a measure of redemption through conscientious resistance, McKay renders New York as a stark labyrinth whose exclusion becomes a form of entrapment in the cruel talons of Liberty. In "The City's Love," the city comes alive for him in a form clearly influenced by Johnson's white witch city:

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,
The gracious city swept across the line;
Oblivious of the color of my skin,
Forgetting that I was an alien guest,
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast.

The city as feminized space shows the poet her tempting face, testing his "inviolate" heart by "[sweeping] across the line." Denied "masculine" prerogative in the maintenance and transgression of boundaries, however, the speaker is the one whose spatial integrity is at issue here, a circumstance magnified by his inability to hold the city's attention beyond "one flame hour." The passage might refer to one of those moments when McKay, among a group of radical artists and writers associated with the journals the Masses and the Liberator, found some respite from the raging color consciousness of the era, although he was to find sufficient prejudice within socialism to make him an outcast among outcasts.

However, such idylls are eventually disturbed by vampiric figures that link McKay to Du Bois and Johnson before him, as the moments of "loveliness" described in "The City's Love":

Oh cold as death is all the loveliness,
That breathes out of the strangeness of the scene,
And sickening like a skeleton's caress,
Of clammy clinging fingers long and lean.

McKay's adaptation of Johnson's witch, who twines her arms about her victim and binds him with her hair, is more fully realized in his sonnet "America":

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps me like a flood.

McKay's earlier "Tiger" had similarly explored the sexual suggestiveness and sadomasochism of black/white contact, imagining the "white man [as] a tiger at" his throat, "muttering that his terrible striped coat / Is Freedom's." "America" employs the tiger image in a
heterosexual encounter, in the tradition of Johnson's witch. She is a phallic mother, simultaneously exploiting and nourishing the entrapped immigrant "stand[ing] within her walls with not a shred / Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer." The cruel paradox of life in a racist America is that the race hero stands "erect" only through resistance to America's resistance.

Similarly, McKay's "The White City" finds his victimization strangely invigorating:

My being would be a skeleton, a shell,
If this dark Passion that fills my every mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell;
Did not forever feed me vital blood.

Only the hate engendered in the poet by the city's callous disregard keeps him alive, keeps him from being drained, and, because that hatred is an ever renewing source of energy, his death-in-life is eternal. McKay captures that simultaneous exclusion and enclosure in the image of the city veiled by a "mist." Thus his failed "inventory" leads to a perversely gratifying hatred of that which he can see dimly through the veil of whiteness but never seemingly possess.

With McKay, exclusion from the myth of "Liberty" in New York necessitates a paradoxical protective self-enclosure. The act of self-restraint becomes itself the imprisonment against which the poet's spirit rebels. McKay envisions the black American, then, as having internalized his own oppression sufficiently to love the possibility of AMERICA, while hating the self that both disallows participation in that freedom and protectively numbs the spirit against such desire. As Houston Baker has suggested, it has been this eternally deferred possibility of an egalitarian social order that has alienated black Americans, and McKay's poetry reveals clearly how entrapment in this myth of AMERICA is the form that social exclusion often takes. McKay thus became the forerunner of poet Langston Hughes and novelists Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, who would explore the contradictions of the urban ghetto's proximity but incomplete access to the wealth and power of America.

Taken as a whole, McKay's works reiterate the earlier immigrant experience of Du Bois and Johnson in giving voice to two distinct narratives of New York: the mythic New York as the gateway to America, and the cruel, indifferent New York as the destroyer of dreams. In the context of the black northward migration, this body of work collectively reveals the anti-"prospect" as a characteristic stance of black literary production - a gaze upon the seductive myth of American spatial freedom that yields only visions of further enslavement and misery. This vision is acutely modern in that its consciousness of alienation does not quite extinguish the quest for cherished ideals. It betrays the would-be race hero as always potentially a masochistic product of a slave mentality, in love with that which hates him. The gaze from without fails to penetrate; the gaze from within is mesmerized by its spell.

More important, McKay's symbolism returns the focus to what, in Du Boisian terms, might be called the "whiteness" of the witch, Du Bois's white witches, as we have seen, did not have to
be racially identified as "white" to serve as agents of American materialism: for Du Bois, the "white soul" was more threatening than the white body. As the center of the American capitalist myth machinery, New York symbolized the social "space" of "whiteness" in American culture, dwarfing the literally white sites of governmental authority in Washington, D.C., in the public imagination. The "whiteness" of America was a myth that had to be resisted because it had but one implication that all blacks could agree on - the death of blackness. McKay is Graves's "true poet," in love with the pitiless goddess Liberty, who would as soon crush him as embrace him. It is the colossal ambivalence of his posture that inaugurates the Harlem Renaissance as the public fantasy of America's two social bodies living inside each other's soul.


Publication Status:
Excerpted Criticism [1]
Publication:
- Private group -
Criticism Target:
Claude McKay [2]
Author:
Felipe Smith [3]
Poem:
The White City [4]

Source URL: https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/felipe-smith-white-city

Links
[1] https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism
[3] https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/felipe-smith