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# PEONS, TOILERS, AND VAGABONDS: LABOR AND LITERATURE IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC, 1900-1945

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Abstract

"Peons, Toilers, and Vagabonds: Labor and Literature in the Black Atlantic, 1900-1945" explores representations of labor in Black Atlantic literature and political thought from the turn of the twentieth century through the outbreak of World War II. Rather than subsuming Black Atlantic labor discourse under the rubric of prefabricated formations such as the Popular Front or Proletarian Literature, I trace the emergence of a distinctive political and cultural tendency that I term "Black Labor Internationalism." This formulation names a diffuse but interrelated set of efforts to mobilize and represent workers throughout the Black diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century. At the core of Black Labor Internationalism was a group of peripatetic Caribbean writers who travelled across the interwar Atlantic world, fostering a mobile intellectual culture at the interstices of the New Negro movement, Pan-Africanism, and Communism. While it originated in the early twentieth century Caribbean, Black Labor Internationalism drew upon and syncretized multiple diasporic political traditions, ultimately forging a discourse around Black labor that was global in scope and layered in historical consciousness. To trace the evolution of this discourse, the dissertation departs from the U.S.-centric narratives which have structured scholarship on Marxist African American writing. I instead tell a story of Black interwar radicalism that begins in the Caribbean, intersects with the Harlem Renaissance, and then migrates eastward to 1930s London. Working across the conventional geographic and disciplinary divisions of Black diaspora studies, I show how a migratory cohort of interwar Caribbean intellectuals developed a comparative, Pan-African framework to document, narrate, and theorize the struggles of Black workers and subalterns throughout the world.

The dissertation's four chapters are organized around four expatriate Caribbean writers, each of whom chronicled distinct periods in the history of Black diasporic class formation: Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, George Padmore, and C.L.R. James. In the first two chapters I examine how Eric Walrond and Claude McKay represented transformations of Caribbean economies and labor processes from the turn of the century through the 1920s. In readings of Walrond's short stories and Claude McKay's poetry, I argue that the contraction and outmigration of Caribbean peasantries yielded new and conflicted forms of Black diasporic class consciousness at the nexus of peasant production and wage-labor. In the second two chapters I trace the eastward migration of Black Labor Internationalism in the 1930s, exploring how London-based Black Marxist intellectuals C.L.R. James and George Padmore sought to establish real and imaginative lines of affiliation between Black workers in Africa, the U.S., and the Caribbean. Black Labor Internationalism, I argue, was "translational" in two interrelated senses. On one hand, this discourse syncretized and fused various vernaculars, idioms, and languages as it explored the role of cultural exchange in the development of Black diasporic political consciousness. At the same time, it was translational in a political-economic sense: Because (post-)plantation economies throughout the early twentieth-century Black Atlantic world combined and amalgamated political-economic forms that Marxism had conventionally relegated to distinct "stages" of historical development, writers were compelled to translate between such discrete forms within their narratives of Black class formation.

Throughout the dissertation's four chapters I demonstrate that Black Labor Internationalists developed original political lexicons and aesthetic forms attuned to the distinctive dynamics of class formation in the colonial periphery. Where previous scholarship has universalized the proletariat as a stand-in for global labor, assimilating vast and

heterogeneous bodies of literature under the rubric of genres like the “proletarian novel,” I draw attention instead to a multitude of minor, definitionally unstable, and polymorphous figures of labor that populate Black Atlantic literature. Rather than positing a static equivalence between class strata and literary genre, I trace the contradictory and conflictual processes through which social classes “take form” in Black Atlantic literature and political thought. Building on the diasporic analytic framework developed by scholars like Paul Gilroy and Brent Hayes Edwards, as well as the work of Third World and Caribbean Marxists, I argue that Black Atlantic writers pluralized the homogenous discourse of proletarian literature by translating between discrepant class strata and subject positions. Ultimately, I argue for the need to decenter the industrial proletariat and refuse static conceptions of class in literary histories of labor.

## Introduction: The Fractures of Colonial Class Formation and the Rise of Black Labor Internationalism

In May of 1923, the liberal American journal *The International Interpreter* published an essay titled "West Indian Labor" by the British Guiana-born, Panama-raised Garveyite-turned-"New Negro" literary aspirant Eric Walrond.[1] Addressing ongoing U.S. debates about immigration, Walrond sets out to prove the value of hardy West Indian migrants who "had to bear the brunt of the pioneer work" in the construction of the Panama Canal. Walrond extolls West Indian workers' adaptability and unflagging work ethic, claiming a pioneer heritage that he traces to the "spirit of conquest of the Puritan settlers of the isles of the Caribbean."[2] Much as his former employer Marcus Garvey had done in the early days of UNIA, Walrond invokes the "great work of building up another man's country" in order to demonstrate West Indian workers' indispensability to the U.S. imperial project and, by extension, stake a claim for belonging to the national U.S. Walrond's appeal went unheard: The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act placed a quota on "non-self-governing colonies," effectively banning immigrant visas for West Indians.[3] After the 1924 act, Walrond's terminology for West Indian workers began to shift. In 1926 Walrond joined the editorial board of the American Marxist magazine *The New Masses* and published *Tropic Death*, a collection of short stories chronicling the struggles of West Indian workers

[1] Eric Walrond, "West Indian Labor," *The International Interpreter* (May 26, 1923): 240-242.

[2] Ibid., 241.

[3] Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 82.

during the Panama Canal construction period.[4] Instead of "pioneers" who had "borne the brunt" of Canal Zone labor, Walrond now described the migrant West Indian workforce as "dusky peons of those coral isles of the Caribbean" who had supplied the "bulk of the actual brawn for the work."[5] If the figure of the pioneer seeks to inscribe the Canal Zone workers in a tradition of conquest tracing back to original Puritan settlers, the etymologically Spanish term "peon" instead situates those same workers within a parallel history of racialized labor-coercion in the Americas.[6] Walrond had given up on his bid for inclusion in the American empire and begun to re-narrate the construction of the canal as a story of colonial subjection.

This revision wasn't the last time Walrond's vocabulary would shift. After completing *Tropic Death* and editing a special issue of *Opportunity* on the Caribbean, Walrond was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship to write a series of novels and short stories on West Indian life.[7] Yet a series of misfortunes led to a change in direction. Walrond's fellowship required a tour of the Caribbean at a time of increasingly militarized U.S. expansion in the region. Walrond proposed various book projects based on his tour, including an account of armed peasant resistance to the U.S. occupation of Haiti. As Walrond planned it, the *Revolt of the Cacos* would have demonstrated that peasant guerilla fighters were "forced by abuses perpetrated under the corvée to take up arms in defense of their dignity and integrity."[8] Yet the book never came to fruition.

[4] See Michael Niblett, "Eric Walrond and the Proletarian Arts Movement," in *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola and Carl A. Wade (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 130.

[5] Eric Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," in *Tropic Death* (New York, NY: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1926), 67.

[6] For an account of the evolution of peonage systems in the Americas see William S. Kiser, *Borderlands of Slavery: The Struggle over Captivity and Peonage in the American Southwest*, 1st edition, America in the Nineteenth Century (Philadelphia: PENN, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[7] James C. Davis, *Eric Walrond: A Life in the Harlem Renaissance and the Transatlantic Caribbean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 216.

[88] Ibid., 228.

James Davis attributes the unraveling of Walrond's plans to a conflict between the Guggenheim fellowship's aims and the violent reality of U.S. imperialism he discovered: "The fellowship that represented such comfort placed him onto the horns of the formal dilemma of the colonial intellectual."[9] Whatever his reasons, Walrond abandoned the project. Meanwhile, his plans to publish a second history of the Panama Canal were deferred and finally dashed by the onset of the Great Depression. Depressed, financially strained, and fading into obscurity, Walrond finally transplanted to London.

If Walrond's American career was buoyed by massive Caribbean exodus to the states after World War I, he now found himself at the forefront of another migratory wave with lasting ramifications for the British Empire and its subjects.[10] In London Walrond reconnected with Marcus Garvey, taking a position as a regular columnist for Garvey's new UNIA organ *The Black Man*. Walrond's essays for *The Black Man* addressed the themes of race and migration that had preoccupied him since his Harlem Renaissance days. In "The Negro in London," Walrond documents the struggles of discharged Black seamen, a "polyglot mixture from the farthest corners of the Empire."[11] This phrasing harkens back to Walrond's earliest American stories, which highlighted the "polyglot conglomerations" of migrant laborers in the borderlands of U.S. empire.[12] Indeed, Walrond's essays for *The Black Man* increasingly cast the problems of Black workers in a global framework, drawing connections between 1920s New York and 1930s London. His self-consciously transatlantic perspective served to indict London's racial

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[9] Ibid., 232.

[10] Ibid., 261.

[11] Eric Walrond, "The Negro in London," *The Black Man*, compiled by Robert A. Hill, (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1975): March, 1936: 9.

[12] Walrond, "The Silver King," *Argosy All-Story Weekly* (February 23, 1924): 291.

provincialism: “It is indeed a paradox,” he wrote, “that London, the capital of the largest Negro Empire in the world—the cradle of English liberty, justice and fair-play—the city to which Frederick Douglass fled as a fugitive from slavery—should be so extremely inexpert in the matter of interracial relations.”[13] Nonetheless, waves of migration from the Caribbean to London seemed to Walrond to augur a repeat of the Harlem Renaissance: “But in this respect London may be easily compared with New York twenty years before the big migration which resulted in the establishment of Harlem.”[14]

Nonetheless, if Walrond’s return to Garvey in the 1930s looked in some ways like a reprise of the early stages of the New Negro movement, his writings for *The Black Man* register a gradual but profound shift in perspective. While an increasingly conservative Garvey remained tethered to a model of elite-led racial advancement, Walrond, as Robert Hill observes, “was moving towards an explicit adoption of the theory of historical materialism.”[15] Walrond had, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, gestured towards such a materialist perspective already in *Tropic Death.* Nonetheless the evolution Hill observes is undeniable. In a blazing manifesto called “The Negro Before the World,” Walrond in a few short paragraphs traced the contemporary moment of world systemic crisis to two discrete processes that were nonetheless part of one continuous history: the transatlantic slave trade and the late nineteenth century partition of Africa. “His lands taken away from him,” the African had become “a squatter and a quasi-serf.”[16] Nonetheless, “side by side with his enforced humility, the black man—dreaming

[13] Walrond, “The Negro in London,” 10.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Robert A. Hill, Introduction to *The Black Man*, 19.

[16] Walrond, “The Negro Before the World,” *The Black Man* (March 1938): 5.

away in the African sun—has kept the spirit of independence alive."[17] Meanwhile, "outside the Dark Continent the Negro found himself in shackles on alien soil." After emancipation "the powers that be contrived by their system of economy to re-enslave the Negro…After 'freedom' dawned the status of the ex-slave underwent a change, but the economic system in which he had grown up did not. The men wielding the whip-lash—the sugar barons and the cotton kings, the factory owners and the absentee landlords—were just as greedy for profits as before."[18] Walrond now clearly saw the varied forms of exploitation surveyed across his transatlantic career as nodes of a single unified system. Emancipation required abolishing this system: "If the Negro is to be free he must rid himself of whatever illusions he might still have about the social and economic system that has grown up under capitalism and imperialism."[19] From his position of relative marginality as columnist for the declining Garvey, Walrond nonetheless articulated a new and expansive political vision: Imperial London granted Walrond a vantage point from which to connect the struggles of the West Indian peons, Haitian *cacos*, the Black seamen of London, and the quasi-serfs of Africa.

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Walrond's itinerary does not easily fit within the categories and narratives that have shaped the study of interwar labor culture. Like the colonial migrant laborers he studied, Walrond's career was peripatetic and improvisatory. He does not really belong to American proletarian literature or the "Cultural Front," nor does he ever find a proper footing in the British

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

left.[20] Walrond was in important ways sustained and influenced by Garveyite Pan-Africanism, but his relation to Garveyite ideology was fractious and ambivalent even if he was at times economically dependent on Garvey himself. As we have seen, the renewed partnership of these two West Indian migrants in the 1930s appears to have been a marriage of convenience rather than an expression of ideological agreement. The difficulty of categorization extends to the level of style and aesthetic form. Walrond was never a true "proletarian realist" although, as Hill notes, he was "moving towards" an adoption of the official Marxist style in his essays for *The Black Man*.[21] Indeed, the term "proletariat" itself is notably absent from the lexicon of figures surveyed above. In its place are a kaleidoscopic proliferation of terms, a conglomeration of figures carrying their own various historical associations and meanings. This dissertation accordingly takes as its point of departure a problem of classification. Rather than force Walrond into the mold of prefabricated political and cultural formations, I want to ask what there might be to learn from his restless movement between, within, and across such formations. Can Walrond's heterogeneous vocabulary and peripatetic career be chalked up to individual idiosyncrasies and historical contingencies? Or might there instead be a relationship between the eclecticism of his figural lexicon and real processes of class formation in the Black Atlantic world? Is there a logic to Walrond's nonbelonging—or, put in other terms, a history to which his itinerancy itself belongs?

Indeed, "Peons, Toilers, and Vagabonds: Labor and Literature in the Black Atlantic, 1900-1945" will argue that Walrond, however peripheral he may appear from the perspective of

[20] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, The Haymarket Series (London: Verso, 1996).

[21] Robert Hill, Introduction to *The Black Man*, 19.

the various established political and cultural formations, was not an isolated or wholly unique figure. Walrond was among those West Indian sojourners whose travels put them in contact with multiple sites of exploitation and struggle throughout the interwar Black Atlantic. From the wharfs and drydocks of Panama through the seamen's quarters of London, Walrond documented the new solidarities and cultural exchanges born out of the "polyglot mixtures" of a peripatetic Black working-class. The poet and novelist Claude McKay mapped a parallel but distinct route to Black working-class collectivity, one which began in rural Jamaica but intersected with Harlem, London, the Soviet Union and Marseilles. Like Walrond, Claude McKay moved eastward as the Harlem Renaissance lost steam, settling for a time in a country house in colonial Morocco; there, he found comfort in rural villages that reminded him of his own native Jamaican peasantry.[22] The trajectory of George Padmore overlapped to some extent with Walrond's. Born in Trinidad, Padmore moved to the U.S. for medical school, joined the CPUSA, and rose through the ranks until he was assigned to head the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers and edit *The Negro Worker*. After disputes with the Kremlin led Padmore to resign his post, he moved to London and, with C.L.R. James, helped to organize a campaign against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.[23] James, for his part, also began in Trinidad, where he wrote short stories as well as a novel about working-class life in the "barrack yards," before leaving for London, where he became a leading figure in British Trotskyism; inverting the trajectory of Walrond, Padmore, and Marcus Garvey, James left London in the late 1930s for speaking tour in the U.S., where he developed an original analysis of the American "Negro Question" as it

[22] Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 272.

[23] Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

pertained to the struggle for socialism.[24] Criss-crossing the Atlantic, these Anglophone Caribbean intellectuals developed a comparative, Pan-African framework through which to document and analyze the struggles of Black workers and subalterns. Their travels connected continents and hemispheres: As they traversed the borders of a conflicted and tumultuous world, they sharpened their analysis of the role played by Black workers in the making—and, so they hoped, the remaking—of that world.

These varied itineraries chart the coordinates of an emergent global political-cultural tendency that I call "Black Labor Internationalism." This formulation intends to capture a diffuse but interrelated set of efforts to document, narrate, theorize, and mobilize Black workers across the Atlantic world in the first half of the twentieth century. Scholarship focused on the Marxist and workerist currents of interwar African American literature has tended to assume a U.S. national frame of analysis, emphasizing lines of continuity and filiation between the New Negro movement and the global left.[25] This approach, however, elides the transatlantic circuits of Black Caribbean intellectuals who participated in the Harlem Renaissance, socialist parties and organizations, and interwar Pan-Africanism. In contrast to narratives that see the upswell of post-WWI radicalism resolving in the national coalitions of the popular front era, the phrase Black Labor Internationalism calls attention to the transatlantic movements, mobilizations, and exchanges which ran counter to the hardening borders of national labor movements in the

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[24] Christian Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, C. L. R. James Archives (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014); C. L. R. James and Scott McLemee, *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

[25] See for example William Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, The Haymarket Series (London: Verso, 1996); Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana, Ill. University of Illinois Press, 2008).

interwar years. At the same time, this phrase indexes a collaborative transnational effort to conjure an *image* of the global Black worker, a project in the domain of representation which grew out of but was not necessarily isomorphic with the work of Pan-African institution-building. Black Labor Internationalism was reducible neither to a single localizable movement nor a static set of cultural representations but instead names the dialectical relation between these two endeavors—the organization and the figuration of "Black labor"—in a diverse range of political and cultural contexts across the Atlantic world.

To trace the formation of Black Labor Internationalism as a unified political-cultural phenomenon is a daunting task. While the idea of a global "Negro Worker" acquired a new political and cultural salience in this period, it can be argued that this figure ultimately remained just that—an idea. Was Black Labor Internationalism not ultimately a "failed negation of nationalism"?[26] This tendency, it might seem, never attained the material solidity of nationally based leftist formations such as Michael Denning's "Cultural Front."[27] Indeed, the contrast with the Cultural Front is revealing precisely insofar as it sheds light on a distinguishing feature of Black Labor Internationalism: While Denning is able to concretize the former as an "historical bloc" comprised of a dense articulation of institutions—the American CIO, left parties, and cultural organizations—the history of the latter is perhaps better approached as an idea that migrates, taking a variety of institutional, aesthetic, and organizational forms.[28] This was in a sense a reversal of the developmental trajectory of the international workers movement up to that

[26] Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms," *The American Historical Review* 117.5 (December 2012): 1461.

[27] Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

[28] Ibid., xviii.

point: Whereas the idea of an international working class had emerged first as "powerful imaginative construct" out of the material foundation of national labor movements, the discourse of Black Labor Internationalism crystallized *in advance* of the formation of national labor parties and trade union organizations in the colonial world.[29] This apparent reversal reflects the historical reality that processes of class formation in the colonies were also often processes of class internationalization. Those writers at the forefront of efforts to theorize and represent a global "Negro Worker" were overwhelmingly the products of a "circum-Caribbean migratory sphere" which, as Lara Putnam has documented, facilitated movements across the borders of British and American empires in the early twentieth century.[30] Black Labor Internationalism was in this sense a forced internationalism: Its leading intellectuals were Caribbean writers pursuing careers outside their native lands—typically in the U.S. and England—while its mass "base" consisted of the precarious migratory classes whose labor "built up other men's countries."

If the U.S. Cultural Front was the product of the integration of the industrial working-class into the nation, then, Black Labor Internationalism was propelled by precisely the opposite—namely, the increasing "disarticulation" of the economies of peripheral societies in the first half of the twentieth century. Dependency theorists and Third World Marxists have drawn attention to the patterns of social disequilibrium and disjuncture which arise from the "extraverted" character of colonial economies.[31] Samir Amin has hypothesized that while

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[29] Michael Denning, "Representing Global Labor," *Social Text* 92.25.3 (Fall 2007): 126.

[30] Putnam, *Radical Moves*.

[31] Samir Amin, *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); Jean-François Bayart and Stephen Ellis. "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion." African Affairs 99, no. 395 (2000): 217-67. Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1966.)

capitalism in the imperial center allows national formations to take shape, "capitalist development in its peripheral forms destroys society and hinders its possible constitution into a nation."[32] Throughout this dissertation we will see Black Caribbean writers identifying various complex "disarticulated" trajectories of class formation which develop under colonial capitalism. What I want to stress here—and this too is a point that the writers I discuss argue, in various ways, through the interwar years—is that integration in the center and disarticulation in the periphery are two sides of a single global process.[33] Lenin and W.E.B. Du Bois both observed during WWI that the "New Imperialism" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had created the conditions for an accord between labor and capital in the imperial center.[34] In "The African Roots of War," Du Bois asked how it was possible that the "most rapid advance of democracy" in America had proceeded hand in hand "with increased aristocracy and hatred towards darker races."[35] Du Bois found the explanation for this paradox in imperialism, but more specifically in the fact that imperialism had transformed the nation itself into an agent of exploitation: "It is no longer simply the merchant prince, or the aristocratic monopoly, or even the employing class, that is exploiting the world: it is the nation; a new democratic nation composed of united capital and labor."[36]

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[32] Amin, *Class and Nation*, 174.

[33] See Alain De Janvry & Carlos Garramón, "The dynamics of rural poverty in Latin America," *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* 4:3 (1977): 206-216

[34] Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2011). See also E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage, 1989).

[35] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic* (May 1915): 709.

[36] Ibid.

The "labor aristocracies" which made possible the national coalitions of the popular front era were, as Du Bois and George Padmore argued throughout the 1920s and '30s, built upon regimes of imperial accumulation, dispossession, and super-exploitation in the colonial periphery.[37] Important as studies of modernist left and labor formations have been, such studies have also tended to avoid consideration of the structuring relationship between the development of so-called "industrial democracy" in the metropole and what Du Bois and Padmore respectively called "democratic despotism" and "Colonial-Fascism."[38] With these terms, Du Bois and Padmore drew attention to the racist colonial regimes which, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, applied direct and violent force in order to "mobilize world labor power without restriction" and thereby "utilize all the productive forces of the globe."[39] By eliding these processes of imperial accumulation scholars create a one-sided picture of the national left cultural formation as an integral and self-contained entity, abstracting the emergent labor-capital compromise of the global North from the parallel incorporation of the rest of the globe into an international system on the basis of economic extraversion and unequal exchange.[40] It is precisely this dialectic of metropolitan economic integration and peripheral economic disarticulation which makes a figure like Walrond difficult to place within the dominant

[37] See Lenin, *Imperialism*; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, Dover Thrift Editions (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1999);  George Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U. Magazine for the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1931)*, How Britain Rules Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1936).

[38] Along with Denning's *Cultural Front* see Elinor Taylor, *The Popular Front Novel in Britain, 1934-1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.); Andrew Dudley, and Steven Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.)

[39] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 343.

[40] Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade.* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972.)

frameworks of U.S. left cultural studies. We can indeed read Walrond's shift from "pioneer" to "peon" as indexing consolidation of a U.S. national social compact premised on the exclusion of the migrant colonial workers who had been recruited on a temporary basis for a U.S. imperial construction project.[41] Walrond's overall trajectory from the 1923 article advertising West Indian labor to his later anti-capitalist manifesto in *The Black Man* registers the dawning recognition that, in Du Bois' apt formulation, "the Color Line" had begun to "pay dividends":[42] The national integration of the metropolitan working-class had required the simultaneous "unequal integration" of colonial workers into a larger international division of labor.[43]

The same elision of imperialism that has shaped studies of metropolitan left formations also underwrites the common literary historical account of modernism as the cultural expression of "Fordism."[44] Michel Aglietta, the key interlocutor for the literary scholars who have advanced this periodizing claim, defines Fordism as the "principle of an articulation between process of production and mode of consumption, which constitutes the mass production that is the specific content of the universalization of wage-labor."[45] Fordism, then, marks a distinct stage of accumulation in which "the generalization of commodity relations extended to their domination

[41] Putnam, *Radical Moves* 82-122.

[42] Du Bois, "African Roots," 708.

[43] I draw here and throughout the dissertation on the theory of unequal integration developed by Adom Getachew. See Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 14–37.

[44] See for example Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 37; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1989); Mathias Nilges, "Form(alism's) Now" in *Literary Materialisms*, ed. Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 169-185.

[45] Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: NLB, 1976), 117.

of practices of consumption."[46] This socialization of the wage-relation required the "generalization in the working-class of social structures which facilitated its cultural integration into the nation, i.e., the small family unit and household."[47] Yet Aglietta's model of the Fordist regime of capitalist regulation itself explicitly depends upon a conceptual delimitation of the wage-relation to the borders of a national sovereign territory. "Access to wage-labour," he writes, "derives from general norms, the extent of whose application depends on the organization of political and judicial powers, but is in any case delimited by a national territory. The wage relation can be fully established in such a territorial space only if the sovereignty of the state comes to be identified with the nation."[48] Thus, an image of the Fordist worker is conjured through the elision of the processes of imperial expansion and accumulation which subtended the development of historical Fordism.[49] By uncritically adopting Aglietta's model as an explanatory framework for the cultures of global modernism, literary scholars have consequently ignored the simultaneous *disarticulation* of the labor process from social reproduction which was a condition for the incorporation of colonial territories into the capitalist world system and which has, moreover, remained a persistent dynamic of peripheral capitalism.[50]

[46] Ibid., 158.

[47] Ibid., 159.

[48] Ibid., 69.

[49] Mike Davis has advanced a similar critique of Aglietta. Davis notes Aglietta's "neglect of the changing structural forms of American *imperialism* and their articulation within the overall regulation of relative surplus value." See Mike Davis, ""Fordism" in Crisis: A Review of Michel Aglietta's "Régulation et crises: L'expérience des Etats-Unis," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 2.2 (Fall 1978): 253.

[50] See Amin, *Class and Nation* and Alain de Janvry & Carlos Garramón, "The dynamics of rural poverty in Latin America."

What would it mean, then, to decenter the "dyadic figure of the citizen-worker" in our narratives of interwar labor culture?[51] In this dissertation I seek to recuperate an alternative labor internationalism which emerges, not from the national-industrial moment of working-class formation in the metropole, but instead from the fractures and disarticulations of class formation in the colonial periphery. If the New Imperialism spurred the articulation in the global North of national social compacts "composed of united capital and labor," it also laid the foundation for a Black inter-colonial, transatlantic internationalism which necessarily exceeded the institutional and ideological limits of nationally based labor organizations.[52] The writers at the forefront of this movement insisted on the revolutionary capacity of colonial workers and peasants excluded from the Northern labor-capital compromise. These writers sought to shift the attention of the global left from the industrial center to what Du Bois called "That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry."[53] They argued, moreover, that this vast global system of colonial exploitation was "the real modern labor problem": The fate of the global class

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[51] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 251.

[52]I here join the efforts of scholars like Minkah Makalani, Adom Getachew, Cedric Robinson, Paul Gilroy, and many others to trace autonomous forms of Black radical internationalism. See Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). I take particular inspiration from Paul Gilroy's injunction to break from the "statist modalities of Marxist analysis" and attend instead to the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" of the Black Atlantic world. See *The Black Atlantic*, 3-4.

[53] William E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 - 1880*, 1. ed (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1998), 15.

struggle itself hinged on the emancipation of "the basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black."[54]

Yet to trace the historical development of the transatlantic political tendency that I am calling Black Labor Internationalism requires more than a simple shift in geographic perspective. Walrond's transnational itinerary, varied institutional affiliations, and evolving labor lexicon chart a distinctive path through global interwar politics, one which absorbs and intersects various larger formations and tendencies while resisting assimilation into or complete identification with any single one of these. Walrond, it would seem, was a fellow traveler of many movements, but rarely a card-carrying member. By hazarding the concept of Black Labor Internationalism, however, I aim to suggest that such traversals themselves constitute a distinctive and autonomous political and social dynamic rather than a diminished or polluted form of Marxism, Pan-Africanism or any other movement. In the remainder of this introduction, I aim to identify the various global social currents which come together to foster the development of Black Labor Internationalism in the early twentieth century. The explosive and contradictory social forces of the post-WWI period set the stage for the dissertation's four chapters, which trace the evolution of Black Labor Internationalist discourse from the turn of the century through the onset of World War II.

If, as Denning suggests, Ford's announcement in January 1914 of the five-dollar, eight-hour day for workers who could pass his examination of the "clean and wholesome life" marks the "symbolic initiation of Fordist mass consumption," this year also represents a symbolic juncture for U.S. imperialism.[55] Eight months after Ford's announcement, the Panama Canal was

[54] Ibid., 16.

[55] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 37.

completed, signaling the extension of U.S. imperial hegemony across the hemisphere. With its vast army of West Indian "Silver Workers," segregated in a Jim Crow-style racial division of labor and conscripted to the most dangerous tasks of digging and dredging, the canal extended the U.S. color line into Central America.[56] The racialized labor regimes of America's new empire also, however, had unforeseen and lasting consequences for Black internationalism. The hemispheric entanglements of the new U.S. imperial age produced transnational ideological matrices and migratory circuits which proved catalytic for multiple Black political and cultural movements, from the Harlem Renaissance to Garveyism.[57] Marcus Garvey worked as a newspaperman and labor organizer in the plantations of Costa Rica and the Canal Zone before founding the U.N.I.A. For Garvey, the spectacle of mass Black exploitation in the circum-Caribbean sphere proved transformative. Garvey would later recall that his tour across the Americas prompted "flights of great imagination": "I saw before me then, even as I do now, a new world of black men, not peons, serfs, dogs and slaves, but a nation of sturdy men making their impress upon civilization and causing a new light to dawn upon the human race."[58] U.N.I.A. itself was, as Putnam notes, a "product of the circum-Caribbean sphere."[59] Part of the appeal of the Black Star Line lay in the promise of mobility it offered to Caribbean migrant laborers dependent on segregated and unreliable U.S. steamship lines. On his first postwar tour of the Caribbean Garvey visited the Canal Zone and held a rally in Colon. There, he sought to

[56] Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, Clean&Tight Contents edition (Pittsburgh, Pa: Univ of Pittsburgh Pr, 1985); Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, The Penguin History of American Life (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
[57] Putnam, *Radical Moves*.

[58] Marcus Garvey, "The Negro's Greatest Enemy," in *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, Vol 1, ed. Robert A Hill (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 5.

[59] Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 36.

transmute the drudgery of canal construction into a vision of African redemption. If they had a built an American canal, Garvey exhorted his audience, they could build a Pan-African empire: "They said you could not do it, and now you have done it they want to turn you away so the time ha[s] come for you to build an Empire for yourselves.."[60]

The explosive popular success of Garveyism after the Great War created an emergent and amorphous awareness among both sympathizers and antagonists that there existed something like a global Black working class.[61] Though Garvey himself opposed socialism and the politics of labor organizing, it was clear that his base lay in the Black masses. Walrond wrote after his break with U.N.I.A. that Garveyism was "essentially a movement of the black proletariat," although he also suggested in the same essay that Garvey's utopian schemes were tailored to the psychology of a "long repressed peasant folk."[62] The African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson observed in Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology that Garvey "had the clairvoyance to place himself at the head of a docile sector of a whole population which, in different degrees, has been expressing and indefinable restlessness and broadening of spirit."[63] Consistent with Locke's dismissal of Garveyism as a "transient, if spectacular, phenomenon," Johnson cast the Garvey movement as a transitional byproduct of larger social currents: "In this great sweep of the Negro

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[60] "Marcus Garvey on the Isthmus," in *The Workman* (April 30, 1921): 1. https://dloc.com/AA00027053/00235/1x.

[61] Judith Stein offers a meticulous account of the Garvey movement as a complex and contradictory mediator of early twentieth century processes of Black class formation. On Stein's account, Garvey depended for his success on a rising tide of postwar Black working-class militancy which he in turn sought to reroute into a bourgeois nationalist program. The Garvey movement was stymied by its contradictory combination of class ideologies-- "bourgeois models, petite bourgeois leadership, and working-class members"—and was ultimately "swept away by the historical tide of black class formation." See Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 274-275.

[62] Eric Walrond, "Imperator Africanus," in *"Winds Can Wake Up the Dead": An Eric Walrond Reader*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 123.

[63] Charles S. Johnson, "The New Frontage on American Life," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain LeRoy Locke (Albert and Charles Boni Inc., 1925), 296.

population are comprehended the awkward gestures of the awakening black peasantry, the new desire of Negroes for an independent status, the revolt against a culture which has but partially (and again unevenly) digested the Negro masses—the black peasants least of all."[64]

Generally, then, the Garvey phenomenon was treated as a kind of curiosity, the distorted expression of a mass Black awakening which would ultimately find more constructive channels. The liberal Black intelligentsia cast doubt on the viability of Garvey's separatist program while nonetheless seeking to recuperate a salutary Black internationalism. While asserting the transience of Garveyism Locke nonetheless admitted that "The possible role the American Negro in the future development of Africa is one of the most constructive and universally helpful missions that any modern people can lay claim to."[65] Meanwhile it was precisely on the basis of Garvey's West Indianness—and specifically his association with the West Indian peasantry—that members of the African American elite sought to delegitimize the movement. Garvey, wrote Du Bois, was "trying to solve the Jamaican problem in the United States."[66] While it claimed a mass African American constituency, the movement's "main and moving nucleus has been a knot of black Jamaica peasants resident in America as laborers and servants, mostly unlettered, poor, and ignorant, who worship Garvey as their ideal incarnate."[67]

If Garveyism augured a new era of mass Black politics, the Third Communist International sought to place that politics on a proletarian footing. Lenin's prioritization of the "Negro Question," as Jacob Zumoff has argued, broke from the "race neutral" Social Democratic

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[64] See Alain Locke, "The New Negro" in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 15.

[65] Ibid.

[66] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Back to Africa," *The Century Magazine* (February, 1923): 541.

[67] Ibid., 546.

tradition which refused to treat racial oppression as a distinct issue or consider the specific role of racism in maintaining capitalism.[68] Tsarist Russia had itself been a "prison-house" of oppressed peoples. Lenin had therefore "long argued that the development of capitalism created deep divisions within the working class, including those based on national, racial, ethnic and religious oppression."[69] Initially, the COMINTERN focused its analysis of the Negro Question on the U.S. Lenin solicited information on "The Negroes in America" as part of his "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" at the Second COMINTERN Congress of 1920.[70] At subsequent congresses, however, the COMINTERN's approach to Black liberation was progressively internationalized. At the Third Congress the COMINTERN established a "Negro Commission" and announced a plan for a future "Congress of the Negro Peoples of the World."[71] The driving force of internationalization however appears to have been the increased representation of Black, and particularly Black Caribbean, delegates. At the Fourth Congress Claude McKay drew attention to U.N.I.A. and declared that an "international movement of the Negro peoples" was developing.[72] McKay called for a "Negro congress of representative American, South African, West African and West Indian Negroes of Revolutionary spirit."[73] The Fourth Congress thus marks the emergence of what Hakim Adi calls a "Pan-Africanist approach"

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[68] Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Netherlands: Brill, 2014).

[69] Ibid., 292.

[70] Ibid., 294.

[71] Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013), 20.

[72] Ibid., 22.

[73] Ibid.

to the Negro Question which the COMINTERN would maintain until the Popular Front period.[74] This Pan-Africanist approach reached its apotheosis with the 1928 establishment of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers and the associated journal *The Negro Worker*, edited by George Padmore.[75]

McKay's speech at the Fourth Congress crystallized what would become a defining pattern of Black Caribbean interwar radicalism. McKay was a footloose Caribbean migrant, playing the role of emissary between two great transnational political formations: Pan-Africanism and Communism. Walrond, James, and Padmore all in their own ways would seek a similar "synthesis." Black Labor Internationalists took various conflicting positions in relation to Garveyism over the years, adjusting their stance for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. What they could not do, however, was ignore the movement. Thus, as we have seen, Walrond returned to Garvey in London; C.L.R. James would include a section on the Garvey movement in *A History of Pan-African Revolt*;[76] and Padmore would ultimately pay his respects as well in *Pan-Africanism or Communism.*[77] Over time, a consensus emerged that Garvey had lit the spark of a global Black movement which was ultimately hampered by "petit bourgeois" utopianism. C.L.R. James articulated this line in *A History of Negro Revolt*: "One thing Garvey did do. He made the American Negro conscious of his African origin and created for the first time a feeling of international solidarity among Africans and people of African descent. In so far as this is

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[74] Ibid., 23.

[75] Ibid., 87.

[76] C. L. R. James and Robin D. G. Kelley, *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Oakland, CA : Chicago, IL : C.H. Kerr Company: PM Press, 2012), 87-95.

[77] George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), 65.

directed against oppression it is a progressive step."[78] However, the movement "was in many respects absurd and in others thoroughly dishonest. It has resulted in a widespread disillusionment." Thus, the true historical significance of Garveyism lay in the revolutionary potential it demonstrated: "It shows the fires that smolder in the Negro world, in America as in Africa."[79]

If there is an overarching historical pattern which shapes the emergent discourse of Black Labor Internationalism, then, it is perhaps best described as a pattern of *liminality*. The writers who contribute to the elaboration of this discourse are defined above all else by an historical condition of "in betweenness": Their ideas and their activism are profoundly informed by the fact of inhabiting a liminal social space between distinct social, political and cultural formations, each of which of course also have their own distinct internal histories. These writers are, first, in between empires: They are all in one way or another contending with the hemispheric entanglements of U.S. and British Imperial economies in the early twentieth century. These entanglements are economic and geopolitical but also temporal—they mark a transition not only between empires, but between *ages* of empire.[80] The steady decline of the West Indian plantation had created "the reserve army" of labor which was recruited for U.S. multinational fruit and sugar corporations as well as the Panama Canal.[81] The gradual

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[78] James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 94.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Joseph Cleary writes that modernism was "essentially the literature of an interregnum between the dissolution of one kind of European world-ordering imperialism and the consolidation of a new kind of US-Soviet imperialism in its place. See Joseph Cleary, "Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System," *MLQ* 73.3 (2012): 260. See also Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London : New York, NY: Verso, 2010).

[81] Elizabeth Mclean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital And Black Labor, 1850-1930: White Capital and Black Labour, 1850-1930*, 1 edition (Boulder: Routledge, 1987).

transformation of a vestigial British colonial plantation economy into a "semi-integrated" periphery of the U.S. profoundly altered the conditions in which processes of Caribbean class formation took shape.[82]

This leads to the second level of liminality: In addition to empires, Black Labor Internationalists are also negotiating a liminal space between classes. In my first two chapters I will show how the migrant inter-imperial economies of the early twentieth century tended to take a combined form: The "reconstituted peasantries" which had formed after emancipation increasingly gave way in the early twentieth century to various hybrid arrangements in which subsistence production was supplemented with wage-labor, often for the Canal or U.S. multinational corporations.[83] While Du Bois' comments about Garvey's main base of support lying in "a knot of Black Jamaica peasants" was intended to delegitimize the movement, they also speak to a real contradiction: The Garvey movement had grown out of a process of class formation which was at *one and the same time "specifically Caribbean" and "transnational."*[84] To speak of Caribbean class formation in the early twentieth century is itself to speak of a transnational process which traverses imperial geographies, modes of production, and, in a wider historical sense, regimes of global capital accumulation.[85] Black Labor Internationalists inherited the contradictions of this process of "disarticulation"; yet the same forces which militated against

[82] Mike Davis, "Fordism in Crisis," 254.

[83] For an account of Caribbean reconstituted peasantries see Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974). Petras discusses the "semi-proletarian" trajectory of Caribbean class development in *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 41.

[84] Robert Hill observes that "At its simplest level, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA symbolize the historic encounter between two highly developed socioeconomic and political traditions: the social consciousness and drive for self-government of the Caribbean peasantry and the racial consciousness and search for justice of the Afro-American community." See Introduction to *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, Vol.1, xxxvi.

[85] See Arrighi's discussion of the transition from British to U.S. regimes of accumulation in *The Long Twentieth Century*, 247.

the economic integration of the Caribbean social totality provided these writers with a vantage point from which to draw connections across the wider African diaspora.

Finally, Black Labor Internationalists were in a liminal space between movements. Pan Africanism and Communism emerged in the aftermath of the Great War as dueling programs for the revolutionary mobilization of the global Black masses.[86] At stake in the conflict between the two were starkly competing definitions of the transnational Black collective and divergent visions of emancipation. Over the course of the interwar period Marxism and Pan-Africanism evolved in a dynamic pattern of symbiosis and conflict. Beyond the questions of ideology and strategy, there were structural reasons why the latter could not be simply abandoned in favor of the former. The inter-imperial conflicts of the era led over the long term towards the integration of the metropolitan working-classes into national cross-class coalitions which conflicted with the anti-imperialist internationalism of the COMINTERN. When the Soviet Union deprioritized colonial workers' struggles in favor of alliances with "democratic-imperialist" nations in the popular front period, Black Marxists who had rejected Garveyism formed their own Pan-Africanist-Marxist coalitions which insisted at once on the principle of international working-class solidarity and on the "national" dimensions of the Black anticolonial struggle. Pan-Africanism in this period became the vehicle through which the class struggle was waged.[87] The writers discussed in this dissertation—Black Labor Internationalists—were important conduits

[86] Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*.

[87] I am here of course alluding to Stuart Hall and his colleagues' discussion of race as a modality of class struggle in their extended sociological analysis of Black West Indian youth in early 1970s Britain. Crucially, Hall and co. read the racial conflicts of this moment as continuous with a historical division between metropolitan and colonial workforces. They observe, for example, that Britain's 'colonial relations' were "internalized through the importation of colonial labor." See Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, 2nd edition, 35th anniversary edition (London: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2019), 339–40.

for this process of political syncretization.

*Translating Labor in the Black Atlantic*

Many scholars have identified a general turn towards the "laboring majority" as a defining feature of early twentieth-century Black diasporic literature and political thought.[88] Yet "labor" or "the working-class" tends to appear in such discussions as a static and self-evident object, a hypostasized sociological entity around which one may construct a politics or a political aesthetic. Class in this sense appears, as Michael Denning has put it, as the *answer* that is given rather than the *problem* that is posed.[89] This hypostatization of class can itself of course play an important political function insofar as it provides a conceptual anchor or rallying cry for a political program. When one addresses "workers of the world," for example, it may well be that one is attempting through that address to *convoke* a proletarian internationalist politics rather than simply describe an already existing social reality. As Frederic Jameson has observed, "class is at one and the same time a sociological idea, a political concept, a historical conjunction, an activist slogan, yet a definition in terms of any one of these perspectives alone is bound to be unsatisfactory."[90] Nonetheless, problems can arise when the activist slogan of class is directly converted into an analytic category. Scholarship on "proletarian literature" has often taken for

[88] Frank A. Guridy, "From Solidarity to Cross-Fertilization: Afro-Cuban/African American Interaction during the 1930s and 1940s," *Radical History Review* 87 (Fall 2003): 19-48; Aric Putnam, *The Insistent Call : Rhetorical Moments in Black Anticolonialism, 1929-1937* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); William Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*, 1st Edition edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[89] Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 140.

[90] Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Commentary of Volume One* (London ; New York: Verso, 2011), 7.

granted the "the proletariat" as an immutable and transhistorical category.[91] By avoiding critical interrogation of the historical process whereby *class* is transmuted into *genre* this scholarship avoids adequate theorization of the fractures and divisions of the global working class. The risk of ignoring such fractures is that a putatively universal discourse of class in fact becomes the means for the rhetorical and ideological universalization of a particular class strata—generally, the industrial working-class of the metropole.[92] On the other hand, this abstraction of "class" has also occasionally allowed it to serve the role of a strawman in arguments which seek to counterpose some other better political program against an ideologically rigid "class politics."[93] In both cases, "class" is instrumentalized and weaponized rather than critically interrogated or theorized.

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[91] In addition to previously cited scholarship on the Popular Front see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Nick Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017; Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst, et al. *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-century Literature of the United States* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.) Walter B. Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.) One of Denning's important contributions in *The Cultural Front* was to complicate this conception of genre as an ahistorical "ideal type" and remind us instead that "genres are literary institutions that have grown out of particular social formations and must be understood not as a class of objects but as the products of those formations." See *The Cultural Front*, 202. Still, Denning in this context was not interested in challenging the category of the proletarian itself. The degree to which class itself appears as a definitional problem is of course in part a function of the scholars' archive. While the instability of class concepts is particularly pronounced in the colonial literatures I address here, however, I would suggest that the question of how classes become genres is one that literary scholars of all areas and periods should address. More recent scholarship on proletarian literature and the aesthetics of the COMINTERN, including a remarkable chapter on the global proletarian novel by Denning in *Culture in the Age Three Worlds*, make important contributions to such an inquiry. See Denning, "The Novelists International" in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, 51-75; and Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee. *Comintern Aesthetics* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2020.)

[92] Foley provides an illuminating discussion of debates in the U.S. over the definition of proletarian literature. Yet the idea that this literature should be written either by or about members of the "industrial proletariat" is never questioned. See Foley, *Radical Representations*, 86.

[93] Minkah Makalani and Brent Hayes Edwards, for example, raise important questions about the limits of COMINTERN class discourse. Yet both take for granted reductive notions of class as generic placeholders for "Marxism" while also avoiding consideration of the complex figurations of class in Black diasporic writing. See Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 165-194 and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 241-305.

The political discourse of Black Labor Internationalism, I argue, cannot be adequately interpreted within critical frameworks that conceptualize class in such abstracted and ahistorical terms. Here we touch on the problem of Walrond's heterogeneous lexicon. Like Walrond, the other three writers discussed in this dissertation mobilize an *array* of terms and figures to designate the Black colonial working classes of the early twentieth century. Rather than subsume these figures under the universal category of the proletariat, this dissertation asks what such heterogeneity itself might reveal about processes of class formation in the colonial world. Instead of assuming the adequacy of any single figure as a generalizable stand-in, that is, I contend that the very fact of heterogeneity must be confronted and analytically engaged in order to grasp how "class" becomes intelligible as a social reality and a political concept in the Black Atlantic. I have already listed some of Walrond's favored terms ("pioneers," "peons," "semi-serfs"); in later chapters we will see Black Labor Internationalists employ—to give only a small sample—"vagabond," "toiler," "helot," "wrecker," "slave," "semi-proletariat," "semi-slave," "peasant," and "jacquerie" to describe the Black colonial working classes. Sometimes, these terms are employed quite consciously and deliberately as technical designations for particular class strata. Yet the meanings of these categories are also quite frequently stretched and altered as writers adopt them to new contexts. Often, writers will employ multiple different categories—"slave" and "proletarian," for example—to describe a single group of workers. The creative and highly modular usage of class categories in Black Atlantic literary texts has rarely received any kind of extensive commentary; nonetheless, such continuous blurring and stretching of categories strikes me as a political and intellectual dynamic which merits analysis in its own right.

To note the sheer heterogeneity of interwar Black Atlantic labor discourse is to confront something of an historical paradox. After all, these years also represent the historical high-water

mark for proletarian internationalism. The period of world systemic crisis from the Russian Revolution through World War II saw the international proletariat cohere, arguably for the first time, as a truly global political force.[94] How, then, do we explain the increasing figural heterogeneity of Black Atlantic labor lexicons precisely at this moment of aspirational unity? To answer such a question requires rejecting notions of classes as stable transhistorical entities with pre-formed interests which are mere passive reflections of the relations of production. It requires attention instead to the complexities of the historical processes wherein classes develop as social actors and, by extension, to the related process wherein those actors "take form" in the cultural imaginary. If, as Adam Przeworski has suggested, classes are to be viewed as "effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological," then it follows that a given representation of labor cannot be approached simply as a reflexive registration of a sociological fact.[95] Rather, the figuration of labor is itself interwoven in processes of class formation. Think of Walrond's shift from "pioneer" to "peon": It is clear in this case that Walrond's conception of migrant West Indian laborers is evolving in concert with these laborers' shifting mobility rights and opportunities for social advancement, rather than simply indexing the empirical historical conditions of Canal Zone construction. Class struggle in this sense does not necessarily cohere around a singular idea of "the worker" but instead proceeds hand-in-hand with "struggles over classification."[96]

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[94] See Perry Anderson, "Internationalism: A Breviary," *New Left Review* 14 (March/April 2002), https://newleftreview-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/issues/ii14/articles/perry-anderson-internationalism-a-breviary

[95] Adam Przeworkski, "Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class formation from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Controversies," *Politics and Society* 7.4 (1977): 343.

[96] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 468-487.

The political figure of the international working class is, it has been observed, a product of the abstraction of labor which has subtended the development and expansion of global capitalism.[97] Marx wrote in *The Grundrisse* that the "simple abstraction" of labor in the work of Adam Smith "presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labor, of which no single one is any longer predominant…Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference."[98] Denning suggests that this concept of abstract labor permits in turn the emergence the "the worker" as a global category which names "the masses of wage earners in these new relations."[99] On one hand it is readily apparent why this global concept of the worker would acquire new political and cultural salience in the era of the New Imperialism. It was in this period of global capitalist expansion that it became clear, as Rosa Luxemburg observed, that capital "must be able to mobilize world labour power without restriction to utilize all productive forces of the globe."[100] The New Imperialism in this sense brought about the real globalization of labor which had first become imaginable with the emergence of abstract labor and consequent articulation of proletarian internationalism in the nineteenth century. However, Marx does not argue that the concept of abstract labor automatically crystallizes wherever and whenever labor power is mobilized for capital. He instead suggests that "the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible

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[97] Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, 97; Michael Denning, "Representing Global Labor," 130.

[98] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin books, 1993), 103-104.

[99] Denning, "Representing Global Labor," 128.

[100] Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 343.

concrete development."[101] The category of abstract labor, he argues, "achieved practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society."[102] It is thus only in the developed market economy of bourgeois society, where legal categories and political structures fully correspond to commodified social relations, that "abstract labor" achieves "practical truth."

As Du Bois' concept of "democratic despotism" implies, however, the function of imperialism was precisely to accumulate labor power *without* exporting bourgeois social relations. The exploitation of "darker peoples" offered a "loophole" from the legal fetters of advanced industrial democracies: "Here are no labor unions or votes or questioning onlookers or inconvenient consciences. These men may be used down to the very bone, and shot and maimed in punitive expeditions when they revolt. In these dark lands 'industrial development' may repeat in exaggerated form every horror of the industrial society of Europe, from slavery and rape to disease and maiming, with only one test of success,--dividends!"[103] In the colonies, then, forms of exploitation generally considered "precapitalist" were synchronized with and integrated into capitalism. As Rosa Luxemburg observed, imperialism "leads to the most peculiar combinations between the modern wage system and primitive authority in the colonial countries."[104] On Luxemburg's account, the new era of imperial expansion demonstrated that capitalism could not in fact function without an "incessant transition from non-capitalist to capitalist conditions of labor power."[105] At the same time it was becoming increasingly clear that colonial capitalism

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[101] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104.

[102] Ibid, 105.

[103] Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 25.

[104] Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 343.

[105] Ibid., 342.

could extract value precisely through the "intensification of existing backwards forms of exploitation."[106] The drive to lower the cost labor often led, paradoxically, to the maintenance of traditional subsistence economies which functioned to subsidize the reproduction of workforces. Imperialism in this way served to disarticulate capitalist labor processes from the rationality of market expansion which had facilitated the regulation of labor power in the industrial center.[107] The imperial accumulation of colonial labor power thus bypassed the "rich concrete developments" which had facilitated the abstraction of labor in the metropole. For all these reasons the labor question in the colonies could not be approached as a simple extension of the bourgeois trajectory of class development.

The problem faced by Black Labor Internationalists was thus qualitatively different from that faced by labor organizers and Marxist intellectuals in the metropole. The heterogeneity of Black writers' labor lexicons, I suggest, evinces a collective effort to identify distinctive trajectories of colonial class development for which no adequate Marxist or sociological vocabulary yet existed. In these "disarticulated" trajectories of colonial class formation, forms of exploitation and modes of production from putatively distinct "stages" of capitalist development were synchronized and combined. Capitalist labor processes in the colonial world were thus progressively disembedded from the ideal-typical bourgeois developmental trajectory that had dominated the normative horizon of Marxist thought.[108] These novel forms of colonial class development exerted pressure on the available Marxist categories, leading to a profusion of terms

[106] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, Historical Materialism Book Series, v. 25 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010), 56.

[107] De Janvry and Garramón, "The Dynamics of Rural Poverty," 210.

[108] See Banaji, *Theory as History*, 1–103. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Anchor Foundation : Distributed by Pathfinder Press, 1987).

and figures such as those contained in this dissertation's title. These figures, as I will demonstrate throughout the dissertation, invoke a range of historical associations which are not adequately captured by the concept of abstract labor or the aspirationally universal figure of the proletarian. These terms were not always used in a literal or technical sense, and that is part of the point: The very fact that Black Atlantic writers often mobilized multiple figures to describe a single group of workers itself points to the combined, hybridized, and amorphous character of class development in the colonial context.

Throughout this dissertation I mobilize the concept of "translation" to describe the political-representational practices of Black Labor Internationalism. Translation, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is the "action of converting from one language to another"; yet it may also refer more broadly to "the conversion or adaptation of a thing to another system, context, or use."[109] The dissertation will activate multiple valences of translation as it traces the development of Black Atlantic labor discourse. Indeed, Black Labor Internationalism is translational, I argue, in multiple interrelated senses which correspond roughly to the distinct levels of liminality listed above: This tendency "translated" at once between political movements, imperial histories, and economic forms as it tracked the development of classes in the Black Atlantic world. The liminal historical and social situation of Black Caribbean writers thus gave rise to a syncretic political discourse which transposes, combines, and alters the meanings of conventional class categories. Translation, I suggest, is integral to emergent articulations of Black Labor Internationalism precisely because the figure of the global Black worker could not be conceptually assimilated into the abstract universalism of proletarian

[109] "translation, n.". OED Online. June 2022. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/204844?redirectedFrom=translation (accessed June 25, 2022).

internationalism. Rather than conceiving emergent transnational articulations of the "Negro worker" as referring to an already formed and unified working-class subject, the concept of translation calls attention to the vexed and conflictual processes whereby this subject "takes form" in Black Atlantic literature and political thought.

Though traditionally associated with language, translation has in recent years increasingly been adopted by critical theorists as a heuristic through which to explore political-economic processes of commodity circulation and capitalist globalization.[110] Marx himself likened the exchange of commodities to "ideas which first have to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable."[111] Linguistic translation on this account is analogous to the process of market exchange in which a "foreign" commodity is rendered equivalent and thereby exchangeable with others. As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson have argued, this analogy suggests larger questions about the "production of subjectivity that relates to the commodity form and the sovereignty of money."[112] If the commodity form is surrounded by a "web of translations" which transform concrete into abstract labor and abstract labor into exchange value, then translation is also crucial for the negotiation of cultural and linguistic differences in the workplace, for the establishment of relations of solidarity, and for organizing resistance to capital.[113] Translation thus highlights complex and contested processes of "class composition" wherein social life is disintegrated and

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[110] Lydia H. Liu --, et al. *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* ()Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.); Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*; Naoki Sakai and Meaghan Morris, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997._

[111] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 163.

[112] Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, 272.

[113] Ibid.

recomposed by the commodity form, transforming the various particular labors into a collective subject of labor.[114]

In conceptualizing Black Labor Internationalism as a translational discourse, I join a rich body of scholarship which explores the role of cultural and linguistic translation in the formation of Black diasporic collectivity. While I will follow scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards and Paul Gilroy in attending to translations between languages, vernaculars and cultural traditions, however, I also—following Marx's provocation—draw attention to a complex "web" of political and economic translations which constitute the collective subject of "Black labor" in the early twentieth century.[115] The problem of politico-economic translation already represents something of a subcurrent in Black diaspora studies. Stuart Hall's groundbreaking analysis of racial formations in 1970s England, as Edwards has written, "raises the question of how black internationalist and liberationist ideologies are *translated* from one 'national' context to another."[116] Hall's notion of "articulation," meanwhile, has doubled as a politic-economic and cultural concept in Black Diaspora studies.[117] While Edwards adopts the term as a "concept-metaphor" that "allows us to think relations of 'difference and unity'" across the diaspora, "articulation" referred in Hall's original exposition to contradictory combinations of capitalist

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[114] See Gavin Walker, "The Postcolonial and the Politics of the Outside: Return(s) of the National Question in Marxist Theory," *viewpoint* (February 1 2018), https://viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/postcolonial-politics-outside-returns-national-question-marxist-theory/

[115] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11198944.

[116] See Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis* and Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 66 19.1 (Spring 2001): 58.

[117] Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 195-246.

and non-capitalist modes of production.[118] In the essay "Race and Societies Structured in Dominance" Hall defined articulation as a "complex structure": "a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities."[119] In *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and Rise of Black Internationalism* Edwards expands this account of economic articulation into an "anti-abstractionist" notion of diaspora which "forces us to "articulate discourses of political and cultural linkage only through and across difference."[120] Edwards himself, meanwhile, has noticed a related convergence of economic and cultural concerns in the work of Paul Gilroy. In attempting to define diasporic structures of cultural exchange, Edwards observes, Gilroy describes black culture as "exported," 'transferred," "translated," "syncretic" and "articulated."[121] This apparent blurring of economic and linguistic "translations" reflects Gilroy's effort to trace a Black Atlantic culture which has "built up across the imperial networks which once played host to the triangular trade of sugar, slaves and capital."[122]

It is perhaps unsurprising that notions of economic and cultural translation have been blurred in scholarly discourse on the Black diaspora. After all, the "creolization, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity" that Gilroy valorizes are ultimately inseparable from the layered histories of colonial dispossession and transplantation which have facilitated the integration of

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[118] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 11.

[119] Hall, "Race, Articulation," 220.

[120] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 13.

[121] Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," 60-61.

[122] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 157.

the Atlantic world into a single politico-economic "circulatory system."[123] Indeed, Caribbean social theory has a long history of theorizing New World colonial economies as hybrid, creolizing and "transcultural" formations.[124] The latter concept, which Gilroy also alludes to in *The Black Atlantic*, was formulated by the Cuban anthropologist in his 1947 text *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*.[125] Ortiz' text stages an allegory of Cuban history through a whimsical counterpoint between tobacco and sugar, the country's two primary export commodities. Modeled on the satirical contests of medieval Spanish poets, the structure of the dialogue emblematizes Ortiz's theory of transculturation. This term, Ortiz writes, expresses the "highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here."[126] Transculturation thus refers on one hand to the transformation and blending of diverse cultures in successive stages of transplantation to the New World. But it also refers to a process of economic hybridization: "Some of the white men brought with them a feudal economy…while others, white too, were urged by the mercantile and even industrial capitalism, which was already in its early stages of development. And so various types of economy came in, confused with each other and in a state of transition, to set themselves up over other types, different and intermingled too."[127]

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[123] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 2.

[124] There is a voluminous literature on Caribbean and New World creolization. See for example Daniel Maximin --, et al. *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity* (Gainesville : Barbados: University Press of Florida ; Press University of the West Indies, 1998.), Ulrich Fleischmann --, et al. *A Pepper-pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*. (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2003.); Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1971).

[125] Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

[126] Ibid., 98.

[127] Ibid., 100.

Hall's notion of articulation, Ortiz's concept of transculturation, and Paul Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic as a "stereophonic, bilingual, and bifocal" international formation all constellate questions of cultural and economic translation while grappling with the legacies of the slave trade and the distinctive logics of peripheral capitalism. These concepts have performed a kind of double-duty, correlating the hybrid identities of diaspora with the disjunctive and combinatory structures of colonial economies. This dissertation will similarly seek to track the interplay between processes economic, political, and cultural translation in the Black Atlantic world. Black Labor Internationalism, with its kaleidoscopic proliferation of terms, its restless bending and modulating of categories, and its peripatetic movements across modalities and geographies of struggle, is itself a "transcultural," "articulatory," "bilingual" phenomenon.[128] Indeed, determining a singular name or umbrella concept for interwar Black Atlantic labor discourse has been, to put it mildly, a challenge. By titling my dissertation with three key figures which were deployed respectively by Walrond, McKay, and Padmore, I aim to draw attention precisely to this problem of naming. It is, I suggest, only by attending closely to these writers' distinctive political idioms, genres and vernaculars—even down to the molecular level of the individual word—that we can map the development of Black Atlantic labor discourse alongside the complex histories of Black diasporic class formation.

At its core, then, "Peons, Toilers, and Vagabonds: Labor and Literature in the Black Atlantic, 1900-1945" is concerned with a set of political-economic and cultural problematics which ramify throughout the interlinked histories of the African and Caribbean diasporas. Who is the collective subject of Caribbean literature? *Where* and *when* is this subject? How do plantation societies forged as colonial adjuncts of metropolitan economies contend with, adapt to, and

[128] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 3.

contest violent legacies of economic disarticulation and imperial domination? By attending to the distinctive labor lexicons of Black Labor Internationalists, I seek among other things to respond to a provocation issued by the Guyana-born literary critic Gordon Rohlehr in 1972. The essay, called "The Folk in Caribbean Literature," was published first in the Trinidadian journal *Tapia* and later collected in the edited volume *Critics on Caribbean Literature*.[129] Rohlehr begins the essay by taking up George Lamming's claim in *The Pleasures of Exile* for the privileged status of the peasantry in the West Indian novel.[130] For Rohlehr, Lamming's claim for the "peasant roots" of West Indian fiction is inadequate. "Like all beginnings," Rohlehr argues, "[Lamming's] statement was too absolute and too limiting, especially in the light of the complex little worlds which West Indian societies are."[131] Rohlehr draws attention to the example of nineteenth century Trinidad, where the "phenomenal rate of immigration…and the recurring problem which that country faced of assimilating thousands of people of different ethnic backgrounds and language" produced a literature that reflects a "lack of rooted dedication to the land."[132] Moreover, as Rohlehr notes, many of the writers Lamming points to as evincing a "peasant" consciousness –particularly Roger Mais and Samuel Selvon—are in fact preoccupied with "rootless drifters" and the "dispossessed of the towns" as much if not more than "peasants attached to the land." Given the complex internal differentiation and modularity of the working populations depicted in Caribbean fiction, then, Rohlehr calls for "a more pliable theory…one

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[129] Gordon Rohlehr, "The Folk in Caribbean Literature" in Critics on Caribbean Literature, ed. Edward Baugh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 27.

[130] George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London ; New York : New York, NY: Allison & Busby ; Distributed in the USA by Schocken Books, 1984), 44.

[131] Ibid., 27.

[132] Ibid.

which can accommodate the interplay between country, town and big city, between peasant, artisan and city-slicker or factory worker, and between the ill-defined classes of the West Indies."[133]

Whereas for Lamming the peasant offers a kind of master figure of Caribbean fiction, a common social reference point that cuts across other manifold differences and divisions in such a way as to articulate the unity and coherence of the field, for Rohlehr the "ill-defined" nature of socioeconomic classes is precisely the defining problematic of Caribbean art and literature. Attempts to conjure a monolithic, hypostasized "type" as a source of regional cultural identity will, on this account, invariably lead to various kinds of definitional slippage and terminological confusion. Pursuing his argument further, Rohlehr examines the instability of the concept of "the folk" in the early essays of Kamau Brathwaite: "At times, his usage of the term 'folk' was as inadequate as Lamming's usage of the term 'peasant'…Brathwaite, while he identifies the folk as the peasants, also speaks of Selvon's folk-sources as the urban village. Here are three concepts: folk, city, and strangest of all, urban village."[134] Rohlehr's point in explicating the divergent significations of "folk" in Brathwaite's writing is not simply to suggest that the term is a misnomer that could be remedied by some other better category; Braithwaite's expanded, polymorphous, even catachrestic usage of the term itself points to a distinctively West Indian social-cultural dynamic: "Yet it is not a simple matter of confusion, because in the West Indies, all possible categories intersect…West Indian society is in fluid motion, and often, oscillation

[133] Ibid., 28.

[134] Ibid., 30.

between the two extreme poles of the folk-urban continuum, [which] makes it difficult to define one's terms."[135]

Taking Rohlehr's formulation of West Indian societies as "complex little worlds" in which "all possible categories intersect" as a point of departure, this dissertation maps Caribbean writers' diverse approaches to the representational challenge of class composition across and beyond the islands in the first half of the twentieth century. I seek, as Rohlehr suggests, to "develop a more pliable theory" which can accommodate the "interplay" between different geographic locations and class strata. At the same time, however, I explore how this polyphony of categories expands to encompass sites beyond the Caribbean archipelago. As I have suggested, the complexities of interwar Caribbean politics arise in large part from the fact that Caribbean class formation in this moment was itself often a process of class internationalization. To Rohlehr's list of oppositions we might therefore add the interplay between the "complex little worlds of the Caribbean" and the wider Black Atlantic world itself.

This dissertation traces the development of Black Labor Internationalism across two sections, each comprised of two chapters. In the first section, I explore how Black Caribbean writers of the Harlem Renaissance charted processes of Caribbean diasporic class formation from the turn of the century through the 1920s. Focusing respectively on Eric Walrond and Claude Mckay, the section's two chapters examine how the disarticulation of Caribbean economies exerts pressure on the genres, styles, and vernaculars of Black Caribbean modernism. While they both participated in the emergent proletarian literature movement of the 1920s, Walrond and McKay also developed original aesthetic forms and lexicons attuned to the distinctive dynamics of class formation in the colonial periphery. I place Walrond and McKay in conversation with

[135] Ibid.

Caribbean Marxist theory—particularly the work of Walter Rodney—to examine the complex hybridized logics of class development in the entangled imperial economies of the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere. In Chapter 1 I argue that Walrond developed a "semi-proletarian" style which juxtaposes and "translates" between peasant subsistence production and wage-labor. While tracing the emergence of a wage-dependent migratory workforce, I argue, Walrond's collection *Tropic Death* also highlights the role of unwaged women's subsistence work in subsidizing capitalist employers throughout the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere. In Chapter 2 I explore how an emergent Black diasporic working class takes form in the poetry and political thought of Claude McKay.[136] Complicating previous accounts of McKay as an organic incarnation of the Black masses, I argue that McKay's poetics refract the contradictions of Black Caribbean class formation in a moment defined by the steady but incomplete contraction of the region's independent peasantries. The chapter lays the groundwork for the following sections by tracking the transmutation of Caribbean "peasant" poetics into a global Black diasporic aesthetics.

In the second section I explore the migration of Black Labor Internationalism across the Atlantic, focusing on the journalism, pamphleteering, and historical writing of Trinidad-born Marxists George Padmore and C.L.R. James. Beginning with the COMINTERN's International Conference of Negro Workers in 1930, Chapter 3 traces the emergence of a global "Negro Worker" as an imaginative construct in the writing and organizing activities of George Padmore. Attending to the evolution of Padmore's labor lexicon across the 1930s, I argue that Padmore's writings on racial oppression and the "semi-slave" conditions of Black "toilers" troubles the

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[136] Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 218; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1981), 8..

unilinear narratives of class formation that structured the proletarian vanguardism of Lenin and the COMINTERN. This chapter also charts the institutional evolution of Black Labor Internationalism from the COMINTERN's International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers to the International African Service Bureau of 1930s London. In chapter 4 I turn to *The Black Jacobins*, the epic history of the Haitian Revolution authored by Padmore's comrade and cowriter C.L.R. James. Situating the *The Black Jacobins* within the interwar political and ideological matrix of Black Labor Internationalism, I ask how and to what ends James treats the slaves of San Domingo as analogues for revolutionary movements in Africa. I suggest that James used a complex system of analogic figures to specify the distinctive logics of class formation under the plantation system. Rather than simply assimilating the slaves' revolt into proletarian modernity, *The Black Jacobins* argues the need to rethink and alter conventional Marxist schemas when considering the social mechanisms of revolutionary struggle in the disarticulated economies of the periphery.

# Chapter 1: Representing the (Semi-)Proletariat: Eric Walrond and the Problem of Caribbean Class Formation

## *An Autopsy for the Plantation*

"Drought," the first story in Eric Walrond's collection *Tropic Death*, concludes with an autopsy of British West Indian commodity production. Bajan stonecutter Coggins Rum finds his daughter Beryl dead with a distended stomach after ingesting marl dust. A drought has driven Beryl to the point of starvation, leading her to disregard her father's warnings that the white stones will "tie up yo' guts like green guavas."[1] In the blighted landscape of drought-stricken Barbados, Beryl can be forgiven, perhaps, for mistaking for food whatever toxic fruits the land may offer. Under slavery, marl had been used as a soil improvement agent for British West Indian cane fields, combining with dung, lime, sand and seaweed to maximize crop yields under the blazing equatorial sun.[2] In "Drought," the infrastructure of the sugar plantation continues to organize life but appears in the form of an anachronistic vestige, an artificial –albeit socially consequential—apparatus encrusted upon transformed social relations. The disfiguring economic legacy of Barbadian sugar monoculture is registered obliquely, through a proliferation of metonymic displacements. A cane hole digger, we are told, works the fields on a "a bare cup of molasses coffee"; rotting cane stalks are strewn across the road; the protagonists, whose very name ("Rum") link them to sugar production, are not employed in the cane fields, but complain about the prohibitive price of sugar at the local market ("four cents a pound").[3] Meanwhile the

[1] Eric Walrond, "Drought," in *Tropic Death* (New York, NY: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1926), 28.

[2] Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[3] Walrond, "Drought," 31, 29, 25.

landscape is littered with scraps of an incomplete harvest: "The sun had robbed the land of its juice, squeezed it dry…Ripening prematurely, breadfruits swell swiftly on the hard naked earth, half ripe, good only for fritters."[4] Even while a buckra johnny enjoys the meat of a young water coconut, the "black peons…gather on the rumps of breadfruit or cherry trees in abject supplication…praying to the Lord to send rain."[5] Skyrocketing market quotations on Bantum cocks send country folk staggering home from town; subsistence provisions have withered away under the "sun's wretched fury." Neither the Rums' wages nor their garden is sufficient to dissuade Beryl from searching for an alternative.

In determining the cause of Beryl's death, then, the autopsy that concludes the story operates too as an exercise in sociological forensics. As the buckra doctor excavates marl from Beryl's stomach, Coggins slips into a reverie that doesn't obfuscate so much as it contests the official diagnosis with an alternative chain of causality:

'Marl…marl…dust…'
It came to Coggins in swirls. Autopsy. Noise comes in swirls. Pounding, pounding—dry Indian corn pounding. Ginger. Ginger being pounded in a mortar with a bright new pestle. Pound, pound. And. Sawing. Butcher shop. Cow foot is sawed that way. Stew—or tough hard steak. Then the drilling—drilling to a stone cutter's ears. Ox grizzle. Drilling into ox grizzle…
'Too bad, Coggins," the doctor said, "too bad, to lose yo' dawtah…"[6]

While Coggins' fragmentary response to the discovery of the marl stones on one hand registers his shock and dismay, his internalizing of the tragic news also radically expands the scale of the buckra doctor's diagnosis. What at first appears simply as an eruption of agrammatical "noise" in fact manifests a struggle to make sense of Beryl's death in terms foreclosed by the doctor's

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[4] Ibid., 26.

[5] Ibid., 25.

[6] Ibid., 34.

forensic gaze. If marl appears to the doctor simply as an ingested fatal toxin, Coggin's "counter-autopsy" conceives Caribbean social relations as the true object of investigation. Sounds of food production burst through the semantic containment of postmortem's official transcript, posing an implicit rebuke to the white doctor's empiricism. In this political ecology of scarcity, Coggins implies, an "autopsy" is always already an account of an absence—of the food that should have been but wasn't there, that was not and could not be eaten. It is clear, moreover, that for Coggins the scarcity of food is not attributable solely to environmental crisis but is connected as well to conditions of work and social reproduction. As a stonecutter who cuts marl for wages, Coggins refuses to separate the problem of marl's consumption from the scene of its initial excavation. Contained in a ringing of gerunds ("pounding," "sawing," "drilling") is an emerging apprehension that the real etiology of Beryl's death traces all the way back to the stone quarry. The excavation of marl dust on the story's last page is only the culmination of the extractive process to which we are introduced on its first; in the object of his daughter's fatal consumption Coggins sees, among other things, the specter of his own dead labor.

The conflicted conclusion of "Drought" thus serves as an apt prolegomenon to the political, cognitive, and ecological struggles that define Walrond's vision of the Caribbean twentieth century. Beryl's autopsy entangles us in the contorted viscera of a declining plantation system whose material traces take the form of an indigestible remainder, something both literally and figuratively too hard to swallow. Yet we can also perhaps detect the traces of an alternative mode of social organization reflected in the story's failed metabolization of marl. Indeed, the fragmentary cacophony of productive activity that swirls through Coggins' mind functions as a kind of economic counterfactual: With its incantatory repetition of "pounding," "drilling," "sawing," this reverie seems to evoke the material "breakdown" that would have been necessary

to render marl stone something other than an inimical, insoluble presence in Beryl's body. What I have called Coggins' "counter-autopsy" therefore provokes a set of questions about Beryl's death which remain unresolved by the doctor's discovery of the mortal toxin. Moving beyond the biomedical forensic question "*What killed Beryl?,"* Coggins instead forces us to ask: "What are the material conditions under which poison becomes food? What made marl appear to Beryl as food, despite her knowledge that it would tie up her guts "like green guavas"? What system of values gives rise to this subaltern reappropriation of Barbadian nature?"

The difficulty of Walrond's prose, emblematized in the quotation above, has long repelled critics, frustrating efforts to situate the Guyana-born writer in relation to the political and aesthetic trends of the interwar period. In the introduction to their 2012 essay collection *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage*, Louis J. Parascandola and Carl A. Wade note that "Walrond has until recent years been a lost figure in literary studies…His greatest success came in the United States, but his representation of Caribbean folk life and language often baffled an American audience with little knowledge of the region and its customs."[7] Even as the turn towards transnational and diasporic frames of analysis has fostered renewed engagement with the "lost" text of *Tropic Death*, critics continue to remark upon the opacity and "untranslatability" of Walrond's prose.[8] Interestingly, the metaphors critics adopt to convey the impasses of their hermeneutic encounters with Walrond's text often evoke the problematic of consumption and reproduction foregrounded in the opening story. "As the prevailing discourse of tropicality worked to make the Caribbean suitable for consumption," writes James Davis, "Walrond's

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[7] Carl A. Wade and Louis J. Parascandola, Introduction to *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Carl A. Wade and Louis J. Parascandola (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 7.

[8] Imani D. Owens, "'Hard Reading': US Empire and Black Modernist Aesthetics in Eric Walrond's Tropic Death," *MELUS* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 96–115.

Caribbean voices literally stuck in one's throat."[9] Jennifer Brittan, though she doesn't elaborate on the connection, makes the link between Beryl and the readers' struggle explicit: "What, then, makes this book so indigestible?"[10]

These metaphors of interpretive indigestion thus obliquely register a correlation between the difficulty of Walrond's language and a real crisis of Caribbean social and biological circulatory systems. Nonetheless, the analogy is rarely pursued, and Walrond's opacity is usually chalked up to an investment in untranslatable cultural traditions or a vaguely defined modernist commitment to "incommensurability, difference, and an experimental relationship to literary language and discourse."[11] Breaking from this reduction of Walrond's opacity to a sign of linguistic or cultural difference, this chapter instead takes seriously Brittan and Davis' implied link between hermeneutic and physiological struggle: I suggest that the widely acknowledged opacity of Walrond's prose itself reflects a material conflict over the terms of biosocial reproduction in the early twentieth-century Caribbean. My reading of Walrond seeks to operationalize Marx's assertion that "The mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part."[12] Marx's account of the mode of physical reproduction as a "form of expressing [one's] life," can help us to explicate the politico-economic logic of the "translation gap" so

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[9] Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 171.

[10] Jennifer Brittan, "The Terminal: Eric Walrond, the City of Colon, and the Caribbean of the Panama Canal," *American Literary History* 25.2 (2013): 309.

[11] Owens, "'Hard Reading,'" 109.

[12] Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed., Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 150.

often identified as a key formal component of Walrond's writing. The oft-noted "incommensurability" between conflicting sign systems in Walrond's stories—between the doctor's autopsy and Coggins' counter-autopsy at the end of "Drought," for example—reflects an impasse between what Marx would call two "modes of life." In the first, which we can gloss as the "peasant" mode, workers produce their own means subsistence, sustaining a symbiotic relation between labor, life, and the natural environment; in the other, the "proletarian" mode, access to subsistence is mediated by the wage-relation, which disarticulates labor from the land and from the reproduction of life. I here argue that Walrond's great literary achievement—and the source his difficulty—arose from his efforts to internalize these conflicting modes of life within the spatially and temporally compressed confines of the modern short story. Walrond, I suggest, sought not simply to chronicle a unilinear supersession of the peasantry by the proletariat, but instead to "translate" between them, subjecting each to the cultural codes of the other. In this way he revealed a distinctive Caribbean economic reality characterized by the mutual contamination and disfiguration of opposed modes of production.

In pursuing this line of interpretation, I seek to resituate Walrond's writing within the emergent discursive context of interwar Black Labor Internationalism. Though primarily identified with Harlem Renaissance, Walrond was also peripherally involved in the global proletarian arts movement throughout career.[13] In 1926, the year of *Tropic Death*'s publication, Walrond joined the editorial board of the American Marxist magazine *The New Masses*. Later, as a columnist for Marcus Garvey's *The Black Man* in 1930s London, Walrond moved towards "an

[13] Michael Niblett, "Eric Walrond and the Proletarian Arts Movement," in *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola and Carl A. Wade (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 128.

explicit adoption of the theory of historical materialism."[14] Walrond's Marxism, however, was grounded in the material conditions of workers in the Black diaspora, which often demanded a break from the official doctrines of proletarian literature. In *The Black Man* Walrond declared that "If the Negro is to be free he must rid himself of whatever illusions he may still have about the social and economic system that has grown up under capitalism and imperialism."[15] Walrond in this period joined the efforts of West Indian radicals like C.L.R. James and George Padmore to synthesize Pan-Africanism with Marxism, developing a distinctive political lexicon to analyze the struggles of workers in Africa and the plantation societies of the Americas. "After 'freedom' dawned," Walrond argued, "the status of the ex-slave underwent a change, but the economic system in which he had grown up did not. The men wielding the whip-lash—the sugar barons and the cotton-kings, the factory owners and the absentee landlords—were just as greedy for profits as before."[16] Walrond's analysis, while global in scope, was thus rooted in the underdeveloped agrarian regimes of the Caribbean and the U.S. South. This political commitment to the agricultural periphery, as I will demonstrate, led Walrond to break in fundamental ways from the realist aesthetic of proletarian literature.

It is noteworthy that, in the scene described above, the recasting of individual tragedy as an effect of capitalist social relations is achieved precisely through a jarring break from the representational protocols of social realism. Critics of *Tropic Death* have long posited a tension between the book's achievement as a modernist linguistic experiment, particularly through its vivid documentation of Caribbean folk cultures and dialects, and its status as an anticolonial

[14] Robert Hill, Introduction to *The Black Man: A Monthly Magazine of Negro Thought and Opinion*, ed. Marcus Garvey (Millwood, New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1975), 19.

[15] Eric Walrond, "The Negro Before the World," in *The Black Man* (March 1938), 286.

[16] Ibid.

political statement or work of "protest fiction." Kenneth Ramchand first articulated what came to serve as the default critical consensus on this question when he argued, in a 1970 article for Savacou: Journal of the Caribbean Arts Movement, that "Walrond's stories go beyond simple hardship and emigration themes."[17] While *Tropic Death* is clearly interested in the "social and economic problems" that shape Caribbean society, Ramchand argues, "Walrond is always moving his material away from conventional social realism and protest, and balancing or complicating the tone of the narrative by adding elements that lie outside the sphere of satire, protest, or indignation." Most important among the elements that "balance" Walrond's political themes are "the evocation of a physical world in which the seasons and the elements are dramatic agents; and the expression of a native insight into the ways of the peasant folk."[18] More recently, this assumption that Walrond's political goals were somehow tempered or counterbalanced by ostensibly apolitical concerns with peasant folk life and nature has given way to a more robust and attentive engagement with his critiques of U.S. imperialism.[19] Nonetheless, critics attuned to the political dimensions of *Tropic Death* continue to counterpose his engagement with imperialism, social inequality, and racism to his merely "stylistic" ambitions. Walrond's biographer James Davis, while helpfully contextualizing the reception of *Tropic Death* in the "art vs. propaganda" debates of 1920s Harlem, also reproduces this opposition between the "style" of Walrond's prose and the book's political content. "In fact," writes Davis, *Tropic Death* makes some of the most strident anticolonial statements in early twentieth century fiction and expresses

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[17] Kenneth Ramchand, "The Writer Who Ran Away," in Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage, ed. Louis J. Parascandola and Carl A. Wade (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 27.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Raphael Dalleo, *American Imperialism's Undead: The Occupation of Haiti and the Rise of Caribbean Anticolonialism*, New World Studies (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11704898; Owens, "'Hard Reading.'"

a profound race consciousness. Only its lyricism and painterly quality obscure these commitments."[20]

As we have seen, however, Walrond's experiments at the molecular level of the sentence and the word can hardly be described as purely ornamental. Nor are his representations of peasant "folk" epistemologies easily extricable from the account he provides of social "hardship" and struggle. The full weight of Caribbean social reality is registered, in "Drought," through a radical destabilization of the object of Beryl's autopsy, a detachment of the signifier "marl" from the actual physical stones she has consumed. The relation between the agrammatical "swirl" that overtakes Coggins consciousness and the story's "real" tragic denouement, then, is one at once of distorted figuration and oblique recognition: By opening "marl" to an alternative order of signification, Coggins does not simply escape into some realm of nostalgia or pure fantasy, but hazards an image of the collapsed biosocial infrastructure for which marl has come to serve as substitute. Indeed, Coggins doesn't deny the marl's presence or obfuscate its reality, but instead discloses the conditions of possibility for the stone to take on its catachrestic signification in Beryl's consciousness. This inverted recognition surfaces the political content of Beryl's act, making what at first appears only as capitulation to hunger intelligible as a demand to eat that which her father produces: It reveals, in other words, a form of struggle specific to Caribbean subalterns positioned at the nexus of competing—i.e., peasant and capitalist—modes of production. The destabilization and unmooring of the signifier, even as it seems to surcharge Walrond's prose with a burst of non-representational "lyricism," also plays a key role in the "representation" of this fractured social reality.

[20] Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 161.

On one hand, then, I am suggesting here that the tendency to counterpose a "formal-experimenter" or folklorist Walrond to a "political Walrond," whichever side of the dichotomy one wishes to valorize, is ultimately inadequate. At the same time, I am also interested precisely in *Tropic Death*'s subversion of the conventions that tended to make the social-political function of art intelligible to audiences in Walrond's moment. It isn't wrong to conclude, per Ramchand, that *Tropic Death* diverges in important ways from the tradition of social realism that became the privileged medium of politically committed art in the 1920s and 30s. Nor can critics' struggles to parse the political valences of Walrond's prose be reduced to a mere accident. Even as scholars have started to explore links and lines of influence between the New Negro movement and U.S. interwar Communism, Walrond has, with the important exception of a short essay by Michael Niblett, been ignored in such conversations.[21] This critical neglect is all the more striking given that Walrond joined the editorial board of *The New Masses* in the year of *Tropic Death's* publication and adopted an explicitly Marxist political stance in later writings for the Garveyite magazine *The Black Man*.[22] Walrond's position on the "propaganda" vs. "art" question vacillated as he negotiated his relation to Garveyism and the Harlem Renaissance.[23] By the mid-1920s Walrond was firmly opposed to "propaganda," but in his usage this term signified "stilted, snobbish" works that represented elite Black achievement rather than the lives of "typical

[21] James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*. Niblett, "Eric Walrond and the Proletarian Arts Movement." in *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage.*

[22] Robert A. Hill, ed., The Black Man: A Monthly Magazine of Negro Thought and Opinion, (Millwood, New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1975).

[23] Davis, *Eric Walrond*.

folks."[24] Walrond polemicized against the impulse to "dish up yarns about aristocratic blacks who go to Harvard," preferring instead writers who "don't give two hurrahs in hell for the sort of writing that attempts to put the Negro on a lofty pedestal." He identified with the "swashbuckling neophytes"—Cullen, Hurston, Hughes, Toomer—who refused "Charity or Uplift" work and wrote instead of the "Negro multitude…people who don't have to wait until the pig knuckly parson says goodbye and goes out the gate before they can be themselves."[25] In short, Walrond the biographical person can certainly be considered a "fellow traveler" of the proletarian arts movement. He participated in the interwar literary left. But is *Tropic Death* a proletarian text?

Implicit within this literary-historical and formal question is, I want to suggest, not merely a set of political or stylistic commitments but also the wider historical problem of class formation itself: Do the subjects Walrond represents constitute proletarians? One might reasonably ask whether this really matters: The question of who and what constituted the proper subject matter of proletarian literature was itself a subject of debate both in the U.S. literary left and throughout the global political-cultural formation that Michael Denning calls the "novelists' international."[26] Nonetheless, proletarian realists in the U.S. rarely if ever questioned that the "industrial proletariat" were the vanguard and political-economic engine driving their political-representational project. Thus, even when self-identified left-wing writers sardonically poked fun at the definitional instability of the category of proletarian literature, they casually referred to the "industrial proletariat" as the conceptual anchor unifying the movement and transcending various

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[24] Eric Walrond, "The Negro Literati," in *Winds Can Wake up the Dead: An Eric Walrond Reader*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, 1998): 131.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 51-75.

other hair-splitting disagreements over form, authorship, and audience.[27] Even as debates over the Black Belt led writers to grapple with the political and representational challenges posed by peripheral economic forms and racial oppression, there was no doubt that industrial wage-laborers were viewed as the proper protagonist of the genre.

*Tropic Death*'s ambiguous relation to the genre of proletarian realism can thus be viewed as an aesthetic mediation of an historical and socioeconomic problem: This apparently stylistic difficulty in fact grows out of a material disjuncture—a "translational gap"—between metropolitan and colonial trajectories of class development. For even in the stories such as "Drought" that approximate a proletarian realist mode, the protagonists themselves are not fully proletarianized, but are instead *semi-proletarian*. I here adopt Immanuel Wallerstein's definition of the "semi-proletarian household" as a household that depends simultaneously on wage income and "other forms of real income—basically, household production for self-consumption, or sale in a local market."[28] Building on a "semi-proletarian thesis" developed by sociologists and economic anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s, Wallerstein argued that semi-proletarianization, far from an anomaly or contingent accident, has been a defining structural feature of historical capitalism.[29] By lowering the proportion of wages within the total household income, various forms of non-wage work "permitted some producers to remunerate their

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[27] Foley, *Radical Representations*.

[28] Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism ; with, Capitalist Civilization* (London ; New York: Verso, 2011), 27.

[29] Shaohua Zhan & Ben Scully, "From South Africa to China: land, migrant labor and the semi-proletarian thesis revisited," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45:5-6 (2008): 1018-1038. See also: Giovanni Arrighi, "International Corporations, Labor Aristocracies, and Economic Development in Tropical Africa" in *Imperialism and Underdevelopment: A Reader*, edited by Robert I. Rhodes (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 220–267; Michael Buroway, "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 81.5 (1976), 1050–1087; Claude Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production," *Economy and Society* 1.1 (1972): 93–105; and Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid," *Economy and Society* 1.4 (1972): 425–456.

workforce at lower rates, thereby reducing their cost of production and increasing their profit margins."[30] Semi-proletarianization has consistently accompanied the incorporation of new geographic areas into the capitalist world system, which, as Wallerstein argues, was historically driven by the search for low cost labor forces. "If we now look at global empirical reality throughout the time-space of historical capitalism," Wallerstein writes, "we suddenly discover that the location of wage-workers in semi-proletarian rather than in proletarian households has been the statistical norm."[31]

While it has been a common trajectory throughout the peripheral world, semi-proletarianization has been a particularly salient theme of Caribbean political-economic development. As Elizabeth Petras has demonstrated, the historical origins of Caribbean semi-proletarian class structures lie in the "unique subeconomy" of peasant production which developed during slavery.[32] Planters encouraged slaves to engage in private cultivation in order to supplement scarce food supplies, thus externalizing the cost of workforce reproduction. Ken Post suggests that the plantation system "articulated two complementary (but antagonistic) modes of production," one in which "centrally-directed slave gangs raised cash crops," and another "in which slaves were allowed to grow foodstuffs on their own plots."[33] Slaves' independent provision grounds became the basis of an internal market, fostering a "network of communal, family, and gender relations which constituted a semiautonomous moral and social

[30] Wallerstein and Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism ; with, Capitalist Civilization*, 27.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 41.

[33] Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath*, Series on the Development of Societies, v. 3 (The Hague ; Boston: Nijhoff, 1978), 23.

order."[34] The provision ground, notes Holt, gave rise to a "moral economy" which emphasized the imperatives of autonomy and independent land ownership.[35] After emancipation, freed people purchased land *en masse* in an effort to minimize dependence on the plantations. Yet the post-emancipation period also saw the emergence of households which combined estate labor with the cultivation of ground crops on unused estate lands. These households, notes Petras, were "neither peasant nor proletarian."[36] They were "governed by, yet free from, the constraints of the labor market, the fluctuations of commodity production, or the geographic confines of a natural household economy."[37] This combined arrangement was thus an adaptive strategy oriented towards the maximization of autonomy. As Mintz puts it, such strategies "represented a reaction to the plantation economy, a negative reflex to enslavement, mass production, monocrop dependence, and metropolitan control. Though [they] continued often to work on plantations for wages to eke out their cash needs, their orientation was in fact antagonistic to the plantation rationale. Thus in the Caribbean colonies…a whole new way of life grew, largely in the interstices between plantation areas."[38]

The combined peasant-proletarian households which formed after emancipation established a pattern of Caribbean class formation which, as Petras has argued, persisted into the twentieth century. Petras indeed argues for the basic continuity of this combined form across Caribbean history from slavery through the present: "From 1838 to the twentieth century, and

[34] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938*, First Edition edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 168.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 38.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Sidney Mintz, Foreword to *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean* by Ramiro Guerra y Sanchez (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), xx-xxi.

even to the present in many of the smaller islands, this combined form prevails. A stage of arrested proletarian development, this arrangement carried with it the implication of movement or process from subsistence independent of capitalist market relations to subsistence dependent on a capitalist labor market."[39] In the early twentieth century workers' retention of a foothold in subsistence production could function both as a bulwark against wage-dependence and as benefit to capitalist employers who, like the planters before them, viewed peasant economy as a subsidy for workforce reproduction. "Arrested proletarian development" also had the advantage of inhibiting the crystallization of organized conflict between labor and capital. Walter Rodney indeed observes that in early twentieth-century Guyana "the differentiation of working class, peasantry, and middle class was incomplete…The remarkable extent of planter political power meant that steps were taken to keep other classes underdeveloped, and the boundaries between them were very fluid." [40] The incomplete differentiation of classes set the stage for the increasing prevalence of "part-time proletarian households" which combined subsistence production with wage labor activities outside the islands. In the age of U.S. hemispheric expansion Caribbean households tended to be "geographically separated by cross-national migration," creating a gendered division of labor between core and periphery: "Whereas male household members migrated to Panama, Costa Rica or Cuba perhaps many times over a work life, female members and the elderly and very young more likely remained on the island, engaging in household subsistence activities mostly organized around the cultivation of cash crops."[41] It was in the era of U.S. imperial expansion that the term "semi-proletarian" entered the lexicon of Caribbean

[39] Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 41.

[40] Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, 218.

[41] Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration*, 42.

Marxism. As early as 1931 George Padmore observed in *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* that Caribbean workers under the yoke of U.S. Imperialism were "becoming a landless semi-proletariat, working part of the time on the land and another part in industry."[42]

The Caribbean Marxist concept of semi-proletarianization, I want to suggest, offers an interpretive prism which can clarify the problems of class formation and struggle in Walrond's text. In "Drought," as we have seen, the Rums depend not solely on Coggins' wages nor on Sissie's garden but rather on the combination of the two. The Rums purchase goods at the local market but they, and especially Sissie, also engage in household production for self-consumption. Expanding outward, it is clear that many of the Black "peons" in Walrond's Barbados—and indeed, throughout the entirety of *Tropic Death*—are engaged simultaneously in various forms of wage-labor and petty subsistence activity. To harp on these characters' semi-proletarian status might appear somewhat pedantic. After all, doesn't this hybrid formulation maintain the centrality of the figure of the proletarian, merely qualifying it with a supplemental prefix? Yet, the combined economic form of the Rum household is, as we have seen, not incidental but essential to the cognitive and social conflicts that unfold across the story. It is impossible to ignore the fact that Beryl dies by consuming a natural resource whose extraction provides the basis for the wage portion of the family income. The act acquires its symbolic significance, then, only within the fractures of these combined but antagonistic modes of production. By eating the toxic stones, Beryl seeks to complete the metabolic cycle of production and reproduction that Caribbean political ecology no longer permits. Tragically, then, Beryl's death is the result of her commitment to a "form of expressing her life."

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[42] George Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U. Magazine for the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1931), 122.

In this chapter I will argue that Walrond developed a "semi-proletarian" aesthetic while chronicling processes of Caribbean class formation in the age of the New American Imperialism. Despite his apparent marginality to the proletarian literature movement, Walrond was among the first to develop a distinctive aesthetic response to the disarticulation of Caribbean economies in the early twentieth century. In later years Caribbean critics would theorize the region's literature as a site of "ambivalent" or "schizophrenic" antagonism between capitalist and pre-capitalist cultural epistemologies. Sylvia Wynter famously locates the antirealistic aesthetics of Caribbean literature in a conflict between the "plot" and the plantation. Wynter argues that the plots of land allocated to transplanted African slaves in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean served as the germinating ground for a peasant culture organized around "use-values."[43] The conflict between the culture of use-values (associated with the plot) and exchange-values (associated with the plantation), on Wynter's account, is a source of continuous epistemic destabilization and struggle in Caribbean society, as it pits one set of "facts" against another.[44] This chapter draws on Wynter's analysis, adopting her definitions of "use-value" and "exchange-value" to describe the cultural and epistemic struggles of the Caribbean working classes. However, semi-proletarian households also trouble Wynter's "plot-plantation" binary by recuperating peasant production itself as an invisible subsidy for capital. Rather than simply pitting use-values against exchange-values, Walrond's stories examine how Caribbean struggles unfold simultaneously within these opposed regimes of value. By analyzing how Walrond "translates" across opposed modes of production, then, this chapter also seeks to complicate notions of literary genre as straightforward transmutations of unified and homogenous class strata. Instead of treating

[43] Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 95–102.

[44] Ibid., 95.

Walrond's stories as straightforward expressions of peasant or proletarian consciousness, this chapter responds to Gordon Rohlehr's call for a "a more pliable theory…one which can accommodate the interplay between country, town and big city, between peasant, artisan and city-slicker or factory worker, and between the ill-defined classes of the West Indies." [45]

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The titular "drought" depicted in the first story of *Tropic Death* is based on a real event, the Barbadian drought of 1910-1912, which coincided with and likely motivated the Walrond family's emigration from Barbados to the Panama Canal Zone. Following on the heels of a disastrous economic depression, the drought of 1910 starkly illustrated what George Beckford calls the "social diseconomies" of post-emancipation plantation societies.[46] Even as a spike in the value of molasses exports brought temporary relief to planters during this period, "rising sugar output…was associated with diminishing food production and inflationary prices for scarce foodstuffs."[47] In the years leading up to the drought, Barbados planters had both rejected alternative plans of subsistence-based economic development and refused to raise wages, deliberately pauperizing the rural masses to preserve their dependence on a declining sugar economy.[48] In the Barbados of Walrond's "Drought," plantation labor has been disarticulated from the means of individual subsistence: "Once a day the Rums ate. At dusk, curve of crimson

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[45] Gordon Rohlehr, "The Folk in Caribbean Literature" in *Critics on Caribbean Literature*, ed. Edward Baugh (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 28.

[46] George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*, 2nd ed. edition (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 1999), 177.

[47] Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State*, 2nd ed (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 207.

[48] Beckles, *A History of Barbados*.

gold in the sensuous tropic sky, they had tea. English to a degree, it was a rite absurdly regal. Pauperized native blacks clung to the utmost vestiges of the Crown. Too, it was more than a notion for a black cane hole digger to face the turmoil of a hoe or fork or 'bill'—zigaboo word for cutlass—on a bare cup of molasses coffee."[49] Walrond's narrator castigates the Rums' identification with Englishness as anachronistic, incongruous with their daily conditions of material deprivation. The cane hole diggers' "bare cup of molasses coffee" similarly signifies the abjection of dependency on a politico-economic institution incapable of sustaining life. At the same time, Black workers' dedicated consumption of quintessentially "English" commodities seems to bare the trace of a desire, not only for food itself, but for an organic continuity between colonial agricultural labor and daily social provisions. It is within the matrix of this politico-economic desire that marl stone acquires its complex, polyvalent symbolism in the story. The contradictory cluster of meanings ascribed to marl can indeed be understood as symptomatic of a contest over the legacy of the plantation-plot dichotomy within a semi-proletarianized Black household. From the scene of Coggins' labor in the stone quarry on the story's first page through Beryl's autopsy on its last, marl serves at once as a metonym for a declining agricultural economy and as a substitute for the social provisions that economy has failed to deliver. The modular signification of marl thus reflects its status as mediator of the use-value/exchange-value antagonism: the stones themselves are material incarnations of conflicting value systems, symbolic sedimentations of struggle over the social function of the Bajan ground.

The drought of 1910 had the paradoxical effect of heightening the rural masses' dependence on wage labor even while demonstrating the social impoverishment which grows out of the expansion of the wage-relation. Each of three protagonists of Walrond's story—Beryl,

[49] Walrond, "Drought," 31.

Coggins, and Sissie—is forced to negotiate this contradictory reality. The structure of the semi-proletarian household as hybrid politico-economic unit means that each characters' strategies of adaptation are shaped by his or her role in the household division of labor, but also by the recognition that his or her distinct role can only ever amount to a portion of the total household income. In this way the family itself becomes a microcosm for what Wynter describes as the broader cultural conflict between the systems of "use-values" and "exchange-values."

These competing value systems are, both in "Drought" and throughout the collection, mapped onto an emergent gendered division of labor in which men become tethered to the wage while women engage in various forms of household subsistence work. Women's subsistence labor becomes a principal site of cultural conflict in the text precisely because of the contradictory position it occupies within semi-proletarianized households. A brief altercation between Coggins and Sissie concerning the latter's treatment of Beryl suggests the dual meanings accorded household work under a semi-proletarian household structure. When Coggins reprimands Sissie, who has harshly admonished and hit Beryl for eating marl stones, Sissie curtly dismisses him: "Oh, go 'long you, always tryin' to prevent me from beatin' them. When she get sick who gwine tend she? Me or you? Man, go 'bout yo business."[50] Sissie's assertion of a prerogative to discipline her children how she chooses reflects the knowledge that the burden of care will fall on her. At the same time, this assertion reflects a refusal to confer moral authority on Coggins' status as wage-earner. Indeed, by ordering Coggins to go about his "business," Sissie seems to suggest that this status in fact renders him subordinate within the moral order of the household. While the forms of household income are divided by gender, then, the moral-political value of "breadwinner" has not yet been attached to the wage. Sissie holds tenaciously

[50] Walrond, "Drought," 28.

to the social power that comes with control over household production: "Running a house on dry-rot herring bone, a pint of stale, yellowless corn meal, a few spuds, yet proud, thumping the children around for eating scraps, for eating food cooked by hands other than hers."[51] Sissie's moral authority in the household is thus connected to the relative autonomy she has enjoyed as a producer; at the same time, the drought has rendered that role precarious. "You t'ink I must be pick up money," she scolds Coggins when he requests salt fish for dinner. "Wha' you expect mah to get it from, wit' butter an' lard so dear, an' sugar four cents a pound…You forget I ain't workin' ni, yo' forget dat I can't even get water to drink, much mo' grow onions or green peas. Look outside. Look in the yard. Look at the parsley vines."[52] Sissie's anger in this moment is shaped doubly by the destruction of her garden and by her husband's insensibility to the unwaged nature of her work. It is important to grapple with the multiple political valences of Sissie's frustration here: As her household work is undergoing structural devaluation, she must protest her exclusion from the wage, but also the growing socioeconomic primacy of the wage relation itself. Sissie is, to again use the term favored by Wynter, ambivalent: Even as she asserts her dominant role in the household, she must confront an emergent form of patriarchal power that feeds itself parasitically on her unremunerated labor.

If Sissie is a household producer of use-values defending her family against the incursions of a market upon which they nonetheless increasingly depend, Coggins is a wage laborer whose personal values are nonetheless maladjusted to the wage system. Coggins works at the stone quarry, but his moment of greatest triumph comes when he splits a hen's craw and serves his family with the bird's undigested corn. Walrond's description of the feast that follows

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 29.

highlights the disjunction between Coggins' labor as a stone cutter and the supplemental role he plays in the home as a scavenger of use-values. Foreshadowing the discovery of marl stones in Beryl's autopsy, Walrond's detailed rendering of ingestion and digestion in this scene heightens the antagonism between the physiological imperative to eat and the structural malnourishment of the Bajan economy: "Coggins ate. It was hot—hot food. It fused life into his body. It rammed the dust which had gathered in his throat at the quarry so far down into his stomach that he was unaware of its presence. And to eat food that had butter on it was a luxury. Coggins sucked up every grain it."[53] Coggins' meal registers as an almost aggressive affront to his own labor as a stonecutter, a kind of temporary victory of self-sustaining food-procurement against the material residue of the day's work. As in Beryl's autopsy, the starved body here serves as a visceral microcosm of larger social conflicts, indexing a widening schism between labor and the reproduction of life. Coggins' autonomous procurement, consumption, and digestion of corn asserts the vitality of a biosocial metabolism in conflict with a colonial capitalist economy that simultaneously exploits his labor and denies him food.[54] The very ability to nourish oneself—to "fuse life" into one's body—appears here as antagonistic towards a broken economic circulatory system in which to work for another is also to produce the conditions for one's own death.

Walrond thus primes us to consider Beryl's death, not simply as a tragic outcome of poverty, but as a condensation of contradictions immanent to the Black Caribbean semi-proletarian household. Beryl's autopsy inverts the scene of the corn feast: If Coggins represses the traces of his labor through the consumption of self-procured food, Beryl appropriates marl

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[53] Ibid., 30.

[54] I draw here on John Bellamy Foster's account of Marx's theory of the "metabolic rift." John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1, 1999): 366–405, https://doi.org/10.1086/210315.

itself as food and thus recalls the scene of Coggin's labor. In Beryl's autopsy Coggins discovers the value-generative, "productive consumption" of his labor power transposed, through Beryl's insatiable will to live, into a subjunctive use-value—a substitute for the food his work as a stone-cutter could not produce.[55] This act of catachrestic substitution forces a simultaneously political and epistemological confrontation with the "bewitched reality" of the market system. Here it is useful to recall the dimension of Wynter's argument concerning the status of the "real" in plantation society. For Wynter, the collision of the value systems of the plot and the plantation, use-value and exchange value, continuously defamiliarizes and destabilizes claims to realist referentiality. We can glean from her argument, then, that moments of intense conflict over the value of material objects—corn for the indigenous peasants in the novels of Asturias, marl in Walrond's drought—will exert material pressure on the mimetic protocols of realist narration. This would corroborate the more recent claims made by scholars of the Warwick Research Collective who, inspired in part by Wynter's analysis, argue for a structural correlation between "forms of irrealist narrative and catachresis" and "particular moments of systemic crisis in the (semi-)peripheries of the world-system."[56] Given the observations scholars such as Wynter and the Warwick Research Collective have made concerning the tendency towards non- or anti-realist literary modes in the peripheries of the world capitalist system, it is perhaps unsurprising that the discovery of marl in Beryl's autopsy forces a kind of distortion and disfiguration of mimetic narration. This is the moment when the contradictions of the semi-proletarian household, depicted thus far in a more-or-less realist mode, are heightened to a fever pitch of

[55] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, V. 1, trans Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), 717.

[56] Sharae Deckard, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, vol. 17., Postcolonialism across the Disciplines ; (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 66.

crisis, bringing the opposed orders of use-value and exchange-value into fateful collision. Beryl effectively short-circuits the division of production from reproduction that defines the economic trajectory of proletarianization, countering "the real" with a system of values germinated in the ground of the plot. Coggins' ability to cognize the political implications of this act accordingly require a suspension of the reality asserted in the Buckra doctor's autopsy.

It may be useful at this point, before shifting to consider *Tropic Death* as a whole, to summarize and reformulate some of the insights developed from the above account of "Drought" into some general hypotheses concerning the distinctive political aesthetic of semi-proletarian literature. My immediate goal at this point is to identify formal features of this short story that strike me as indicative of broader patterns across Walrond's corpus, and in *Tropic Death* in particular. In hazarding "semi-proletarian literature" as a particular genre or subgenre of proletarian literature, however, I am also suggesting that this concept may have heuristic value for a broader corpus of texts—that, in other words, semi-proletarianization as opposed to full proletarianization exerts specific material pressures on literary texts that translate into identifiable aesthetic patterns and strategies of representation. It is useful here to contrast Walrond's "representation" (if we can call it that) of the figure of marl in the scene of Beryl's autopsy to the so called "concrete image" favored by the proletarian realists. The proletarian realist doctrine of concreteness was a product of mid to late1920s aesthetic debates within the Soviet Union's Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).[57] Soviet Marxist aestheticians such as Georgi Plekhanov, arguing against explicitly hortatory and didactic modes of revolutionary art, advocated instead for a mimetic literary aesthetic that would produce concrete images of reality and "the living man." The theories of mimesis that informed

[57] Foley, *Radical Representations,* 147.

proletarian realism inherited a Marxian-Hegelian conception of the concrete-universal "image" which "distilled in its complex particularities the dialectical relations among larger general meanings."[58] Georg Lukacs, in his writings on literary realism, drew on Marx's definition of the concrete as "the synthesis of many determinants, the unity within diversity." Lukacs argued that the "task of art is the reconstitution of the concrete—in this Marxist sense—in its direct perceptual self-evidence."[59]

On one hand, Walrond's depiction of the discovery of marl may be seen as broadly homologous to the doctrine of concretion. The material object of marl stone does, as we have seen, serve to distill and condense the contradictions immanent to the lives of the story's protagonists. The form of marl's appearance is, however, bifurcated along distinct axes of narration—the autopsy on one hand, Coggins' cogitation on the other—that utterly shatter any pretense of "direct perceptual self-evidence." What is dramatized in marl's appearance is an antagonism between conflicting value systems that are nonetheless co-present in the world of the semi-proletarian household. This antagonism is registered in something close to the opposite of concretion: a destabilization of the signifier that exerts a perhaps insurmountable pressure on our capacity for cognitive synthesis. Indeed, the refusal of synthesis can be scaled up to a guiding principle of *Tropic Death* as a whole: Not only does the heterogeneous format of the short story collection militate against synthesis, but each story in and of itself concatenates an often dizzying array of languages, sign systems, and modes of perception that combine and interact without integrating into anything intelligible as a unified social totality. The figure of marl in "Drought" is itself is a kind of microcosm of the Eric Walrond short story, a paradigm of the semi-

[58] Ibid., 149.

[59] Georg Lukács, "Art and Objective Truth" in *Georg Lukacs: Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, edited and translated by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970), 47.

proletarian aesthetic. Whereas in proletarian realism concrete images serve as "perceptually self-evident" distillations of the social totality, in semi-proletarian literature the representation of the material world will itself be riven and split by contradictorily co-present epistemologies and sign systems.[60]

*The Caribbean Short Story Between the Peasantry and the Proletariat*

In 1927 Walrond, buoyed by the recent success of *Tropic Death*, published a short but provocative essay discussing the prospects for a modern Caribbean literature. Appearing in a special issue on the Caribbean in the American Christian Socialist magazine *The World Tomorrow*, the essay, titled "The Color of the Caribbean," is part historical-ethnographic sketch and part literary manifesto.[61] In its code-switching and tonal ambivalence, the essay reflects the multiple social impulses and pressures that had informed Walrond's own treatment of the region in *Tropic Death*. Walrond provides a truncated but evocative summary of European colonization, cultural creolization, and inter-imperial struggle that both adopts and slyly subverts the exoticizing conventions of colonial "tropical" discourse.[62] He inhabits the breathless touristic gaze of "the visitor," awe-stricken by the "great variety of racial types" and "tribal" cultures displayed across the islands. In the same breath, he limns the racial hierarchies governing the

[60] I here follow Jameson's suggestion that the final horizon of interpretation requires reading in terms of "the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves the traces or anticipations of modes of production." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 7. print (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 76.

[61] Eric Walrond, "The Color of the Caribbean" in *The World Tomorrow* 10.5 (May 1927): 225

[62] See Davis' biography for a discussion of how Walrond negotiated these conventions. Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 27. See also Nancy Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.)

colonial social order. "The Negro," he writes, "is the islands arch laborer and the sullen master of its affluent soil."[63]

What begins as an ethnographic catalogue of racial and cultural "types" merges almost indiscernibly into a litany of the heterogenous forms of exploitation that have shaped the region. Since 1833, the "first burst of freedom in the West Indies," writes Walrond, "absentee landlords of Nice and Monte Carlo continue to rivet their eyes on the resilient back of the Negro for brawn to man their scows and lighters, brawn to hoe and plant, cut and suckle sugar cane."[64] However, he notes, "this class of whites is not the only one that has fastened itself like a leech to the buxom sinews of the blacks." Walrond catalogues the dizzying array of social and economic developments that had shaped the islands since emancipation: the emergence of a mulatto elite in the British West Indies, the development of populist nationalisms in Cuba and Santo Domingo, the importation of Chinese and Hindu "coolies," and the "tides" of Black West Indian migrant labor "sweep[ing] over the banana lagoons of Tela and Changuinola."[65] In delineating the "warring rudiments of West Indian society," Walrond seeks also to capture the palimpsestic legacies of empire. The Spanish, the French and the English all make their own contributions, whether it be peonage or poverty or the royal cat o' nine, to "season the Caribbean pepper pot."[66] Even as he appears fascinated by what Fernando Ortiz called "transculturation," the fruitful but antagonistic interplay of diverse languages and cultures that have shaped Caribbean society,

[63] "The Color of the Caribbean," 225.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

Walrond also foregrounds the history of Black revolution and marronage.[67] “In fact on one isle, rule by the French,” Walrond notes in a nod to Haiti, “the blacks rose and seized the reigns of power.”[68] More ominous still, perhaps, are those revolutionary undercurrents that elude the political norms and institutions of the world imperial system: “And for years there roamed over nearby isles bands of escaping slaves, engaging squads of bewildered pursuers or seeking asylum in caves and passes, and ultimately carving out for themselves a destiny and a way of life far from the vision or comprehension of the whites.”[69]

Walrond closes the essay by itemizing the cultural resources that might form the basis for a modern Caribbean literature. “In light of such a vivid past,” he writes, “the question of art, culture and folklore in the West Indies is one of engaging fascination and promise”:

In legends, folklore and the primary essentials of a folk-literature, the islands abound. Rich in superstition, witchcraft and Anancy tales; having in its cities and towns a social life quite as gay and abandoned as any to be met with in Venice or Milan…it is a bit disconcerting to find in the output of the native, with perhaps one or two ineffectual exceptions, none but the remotest idea of the intrinsic artistic worth of all this. Indeed, the poets and creative writers of the West Indies, who, it seems, are just beginning to get excited over the literary traditions of Europe and the British Isles, succeed usually in giving little more than a pretty continentalized version of the life of their exotic tropic heath.

But in this regard the islands are no more “behind the times” than were the United States before Washington Irving wrote.[70]

By analogizing the literature of the contemporary Caribbean to that of the pre-Washington Irving United States, Walrond reveals his predilection for the short story as a privileged medium of cultural valorization and renewal. He also reflects the conditions of political-economic

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[67] Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar*.

[68] Walrond, “The Color of the Caribbean,” 225.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

dependency under which the short story acquires its particular cultural currency: Much as Irving bolstered the U.S.'s position in the global literary marketplace by selling American folktales to European audiences, Walrond implies, the modern Caribbean writer can break from "continentalized" depictions of the Caribbean islands by drawing on the "primary essentials of a folk-literature"—and reworking these into stories to be marketed and distributed in the imperial metropole. As scholars of the short story have argued, the short story cycle or collection has long served as a privileged medium of cultural recovery and intermediation, bringing "submerged population groups" to the attention of broader national and global literary publics.[71] Mary Louise Pratt, in a discussion of the structurally "asymmetrical" relation between the novel and the short story, thus argues: "To some extent, such cycles do a kind of groundbreaking, establishing a basic literary identity for a region or group, laying out descriptive parameters character types, social and economic settings, principal points of conflict for an audience unfamiliar either with the region itself or with seeing that region in print."[72]

One can readily see why Walrond might turn to Irving as a model for such literary-cultural "groundbreaking": For both writers, to achieve such an artistic revival was at the same time to negotiate a specifically New World identity out of the conflicting and contradictory legacies of European colonial expansion. Here we might return to the image of the Rums with their nightly cup of tea: Like Irving's classic folk hero Rip Van Winkle, the Rums index a sudden disjuncture and impasse between the cultural vestiges of the Old World and the pragmatic political demands of the new. Both Irving and Walrond employ the short story to pose questions of cultural continuity in the face of a sudden urgently felt social imperative to detach

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[71] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Sketch of the Short Story* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co. 1962).

[72] Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," *Poetics* 10.2 (1981): 188

from colonial dependency: Rip's declaration of fealty to King George III, much like the Rums' attachment to the "vestiges of the crown," marks the absurdity of imperial identification under the transformed conditions of (post-)colonial modernity. [73]

Yet to consider such an analogy between the nineteenth century American and the interwar modernist Caribbean short story is also immediately to confront its inadequacy. The conditions of relative political and economic autonomy that were also the conditions of possibility for Washington Irving's stories had, in Walrond's case, not been established. Indeed, the Rums of "Drought" also register the obvious limits of the Walrond-Irving parallel: If Rip Van Winkle awakens in a politically independent American state, the Rums are confined to a Barbados that is still very much a political and economic dependency. Perhaps the deeper problem raised by the analogy, however, is the fact that Rip's descendants themselves now claim the mantle of imperial stewardship over the Caribbean's cultural and economic "resources." Indeed, America's imperial adventures in the Caribbean are documented in the same magazine issue that published Walrond's essay. The *World of Tomorrow*'s investment in the culture and history of the Caribbean is generally subordinated to a journalistic, sometimes critical but mostly apologetic, account of U.S. foreign policy. One essay, titled "A Waterway to What?," critiques the official U.S. rationale for the construction of the Panama Canal; another traces the history of the Monroe Doctrine and describes its implications for U.S. hemispheric hegemony; another takes a basically approbative account of the U.S. military occupation of Haiti. The issue does contain an editorial from Jacinto Lopez, who would eventually lead the Mexican Communist organization UGOCM (The General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico), asserting Caribbean and Latin American nations' right to independence and projecting a future

[73] Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle" *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung,) 1880.

Confederation of the Antilles. Perhaps more revealing of the editors' own political investments, however, is a map listing the "products of the Caribbean in order of their importance" and enumerating the value of goods imported from and exported to Caribbean countries in 1925.[74]

By invoking Irving as the paradigmatic author of New World literary independence, then, might Walrond not be undercutting his own call for a de-continentalized portrait of the Caribbean? Indeed, the invocation itself surfaces the political heteronomies it seeks to interrupt: Not only does the Caribbean lack the political and economic independence from England that served as the material foundation for an autochthonous American literature, but the modern U.S. itself now exerts hegemony over the Caribbean region in the form of military occupation, private corporate monopoly over agricultural production, and the massive federally administered geo-engineering project of the Panama Canal. Confronting Walrond's hypothetical native Caribbean writer, then, is the question of whether the American historical sequence of political-national independence followed by literary-cultural independence can be reversed. What are the politics of the aesthetics that emerge under such conditions? What modulations of the "Irving model" are required to reflect the historical situation of the Caribbean Rip Van Winkle, who awakens from one imperial nightmare only to find himself trapped in the "bewitched reality" of another?

Walrond's "semi-proletarian" literary style may be understood, in a broad literary historical sense, as a response to this political and formal dilemma. The formal contradictions of Walrond's stories are corollaries to the disarticulation and geographic separation of Caribbean economies in an era of ascendant U.S. hegemony. Like the laborers they describe, Walrond's stories negotiate the tensions of a liminal social position between empires; they participate in the imperial center while retaining a connection to the "primary essentials" of Caribbean folk

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[74] Leland H. Jenks, "A Waterway to What?," 214-216; Edwin M. Borchard, "From Monroe to Coolidge," 218-220; Paul H. Douglas, "Haiti-A Case in Point," 222-223 in *The World Tomorrow* 10.5.

culture. The short story afforded Walrond an ideal medium for staging the confrontation between peasant and proletarian realities. On one hand, as Walter Benjamin famously argues in his essay "The Storyteller," the story is an "artisan form of communication…traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."[75] Yet "it is only…the secular productive forces of history," Benjamin observes, that "gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing."[76] The beauty of storytelling only becomes accessible when juxtaposed with contemporary alienated forms of communication such as the novel and "information." The modern print "short story" is itself, for Benjamin, far from an organic or natural descendant of the orally transmitted story. The modern short story, Benjamin avers, has evolved into a technology for the "abbreviation" of storytelling: "We have witnessed the evolution of the 'short story' which has removed itself from oral tradition."[77] Despite, or perhaps because of, the role it has historically played as conservator of the old legends, all the more so does the *modern* short story serve as a particularly egregious barometer of the alienation of the story-form from its previous social function.

Indeed, Benjamin was not alone in castigating the modern short story as a symptom of general cultural capitulation to the forces of capitalist modernization. In the 1920s U.S., as Pratt observes, "the short story was certainly the genre most conspicuously caught up in mass production, the genre where the artist had least autonomy or time for composition, the genre for which a technology had been elaborated to efficiently meet the demands of the market place, the

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[75] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 91.

[76] Ibid., 87.

[77] Ibid., 93.

one most tending toward standardization and a 'lowest common denominator.'"[78] The sudden preponderance of short stories in American magazines and periodicals in the 1920s generated such paranoid proto-Adornian polemics as Edward J. O'brien's *The Dance of the Machines*, which noted a structural homology between the short story, the machine, and the military. O'brien ominously warned that it was "imperative for us to devise quickly all possible means of ensuring that we shall retain control of the machines and of ourselves rather than that the machine and mechanistic structures [the short story, included] shall make us their slaves."[79] If the short story seemed on one hand to offer access to a pre-capitalist tradition of orally recounted tales and legends, then, by the 1920s the form seemed to provide some of the most visible cultural evidence for the development of what Adorno and Horkeimer would call the "culture industries."[80] A quick glance at Eric Walrond's resume is enough to indicate a career buoyed by this emergent American mass culture. Nearly all the magazines in which Walrond published or served in editorial positions from his arrival in the U.S. through the publication of *Tropic Death*—which included among others Garvey's *Negro World*, *Vanity Fair*, *The World Tomorrow*, Charles Johnson's *Opportunity* and *The New Masses* —were founded in the 1910s or 1920s, a period of cultural massification and "Taylorization" in which "the state of popular culture" became "the state of culture generally."[81] The new culture industries, in addition to a program of study at Columbia University, provided the venues in which Walrond carved out a niche for himself as chronicler of the modern Caribbean. His early sketches and stories for *Negro*

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[78] Pratt, "The Short Story," 192.

[79] Edward J. O'Brien, *The Dance of the Machines: The American Short Story and the Industrial Age.* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1929), 7.

[80] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1972.)

[81] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 43.

*World* and the mainstream popular weeklies were, as Davis observes, "generically hybrid, blending travel narrative conventions with pulp fiction and Afro-Caribbean folklore."[82] Walrond's craft, and particularly his approach to the representation of Caribbean labor, were thus shaped doubly by the "'popularization' of high culture and diffusion of 'proletarian' and 'folk' cultures.'"[83]

Far from offering a traditionalist counter to the novel, then, the short story served in Walrond's hands as a flexible, generically unstable, and internally contradictory medium for a self-conscious project of Caribbean literary revival. Walrond juxtaposed and combined multiple traditions of temporally compressed narration—the trickster tale, the hardboiled pulp story, the travel narrative, and the high modernist short story, among others—to explore the multiple political significations ascribed to Caribbean "modernity" in a period when U.S. empire was rearranging the region's economic geography. A hallmark stylistic feature of the Walrond short story is the deflationary or ironic conclusion that subverts readers' and characters' expectations, exposing the shortcomings of a culturally or ideologically overdetermined set of assumptions about how an event or situation should unfold. This conceit takes a macabre turn in *Tropic Death*, in which Walrond at once primes his readers to expect a casualty at the conclusion of every story and labors to subvert their expectations regarding who will die and how. However, Walrond honed this strategy first in *Negro World* and the mainstream pulp weeklies, outlets that served as laboratories for experimentation with the multiple mass-produced genres of "folk" and working-class representation.

[82] Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 103.

[83] Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 42.

Take for example a story called "The Silver King," which appeared in a 1924 issue of the *Argosy Allstory Weekly*.[84] "The Silver King" tracks a U.S. steamboat transporting West Indian migrant contract laborers from New Orleans to the banana lagoons of central America, ultimately following the crew's Black Puerto Rican dishwasher Salambo to a wedding ceremony in a remote Guatemalan village. Walrond represents the steamboat as a mobile theater of Black cultural exchange and masquerade, exploiting and subverting the conventional folk and working-class "types" that pulp weeklies like the Argosy helped to diffuse.[85] The titular "Silver King" is a Black American roustabout from Mississippi who takes ostentatious pride in his job as caretaker of the ship's silver chest: "More than any other member of the crew—a polyglot conglomeration of West Indians, Africans, East Indians, Chinese, Mexicans, Ecuadorians—he was physically and metaphysically best suited for his treasure hoarding job…In the domain of the ship's silver chest he was truly and rigidly lord of all he surveyed."[86] Serving as narrative counterpoint to the Silver King is Salambo, an indolent head-in-the-clouds dishwasher-poet with no work ethic to speak of but a passion for versification and a plan to marry his Guatemalan señorita at the conclusion of the cruise.

The cultural work of the story, which is ultimately to elaborate a kind of self-reflexive and deconstructive metacommentary on the real and metaphoric currency acquired by distinct Black working class "types," hinges on the symbiotic tension between Salambo and the Silver King. Walrond self-consciously draws attention to the cultural politics of Black working-class

[84] "The Silver King," *Argosy All-Story Weekly* (February 23, 1924): 291-97. Thanks to James Davis for sending scans. Putnam, *Radical Moves*.

[85] I am in dialogue with the reading of "The Silver King" Davis offers in his Walrond biography, apparently the only close critical engagement with the story on record. See Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 102-106.

[86] Walrond, "The Silver King," 291.

representation through a selective use of vernacular. As James Davis has observed, Walrond marks the Silver King's speech with the "malapropisms, mispronunciations, and other deformations of standard English" associated with the minstrel trope of the "happy darkie."[87] Salambo's speech, meanwhile, is unmarked. This contrast between the two protagonists' speech styles, moreover, indexes distinct modes Black working-class literary performance. Salambo is a pretentious but crude imitator of the romantic lyric, a tradition he claims to have inherited from an English captain while working as a cabin boy on the Pacific.[88] The Silver King, meanwhile, preaches the virtues Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and reels off what appear to be improvised couplets in a Dunbaresque dialect.[89] The antithesis between the two figures, then, is in part a proxy for Harlem Renaissance debates around "authentic" Black cultural representation, with the Silver King standing in for the supposedly untutored pride of "typical folks" while Salambo signifies what Walrond would later calls "continentalized" imitation of European models. At the same time, the political valences of these questions of racial representation shift in the imperial hemispheric context of the banana trade and its asymmetrical flows of cultural resources and commodities. By uprooting the African American minstrel "darky" trope from the U.S. South and repositioning it within the "polyglot conglomeration" of the United Fruit Company's transnational migrant labor force, Walrond at once capitalizes on and draws a certain of critical attention to the trope's distinctive *Americanness.* The international, transcultural dynamic of the steamboat, then, paradoxically highlights the protagonists' distinct national contexts of racial particularization.

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[87] Davis, *Walrond*, 106.

[88] Walrond, "The Silver King," 293.

[89] Ibid., 293-294.

One key nationally coded difference that turns out to be crucial to the story's ironic denouement lies in the characters' respective relations to labor: Tapping into racist Anglo tropes of Latin laziness and decadence, Walrond figures Salambo as a shiftless idler, while identifying the Silver King with a kind of vulgarized protestant work ethic. "Outside of Salambo," relates the narrator, "[the Silver King's] job was the nearest thing to his heart." In contrast to the timeworn racist plantation trope of the lazy but pliable slave, the Silver King takes an exaggerated, almost grotesque, satisfaction in his work. Indeed, the Silver King's name comes from his job, while "Salambo" is a reference to a Flaubert novel. The specific cultural currency of African American vernacular poetic performance as it appears in the transnational context of the steamboat is thus, paradoxically, bound up in the King's relative uninterest in poetry itself. Another way to put this might be to say that the Silver King embodies the proletarianization of the minstrel trope. In his characterization of the Mississippi roustabout, Walrond splices the folksy pastoral conventions of the "happy darkie" with urbane cynicism of hardboiled pulp fiction: "The Silver King, the Mississippi roustabout, raw, crude, unpoetical, sordid, disillusioned, a romantic iconoclast, a man of the world, a believer in the doctrine that money and not the finer things that Salambo believe in ruled the universe."[90]

The stakes of these contrasting national-racial types are raised when the scene shifts to a quiet village on the coast of Guatemala. Walrond here lays on thick the sensational exoticizing tropes he inherited from the colonial discourse of "tropicality," setting up a stark binary between the cosmopolitan cultural masquerades of the steamboat and the folkways of native Guatemalan peasants.[91] The symbolic value of the cultural capital accumulated by migrant laborers abroad

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[90] Ibid., 292.

[91] Davis, "Walrond," 27.

magnifies tenfold when focalized through the perspective of Salambo's fiancé Elisa. Surveying her newly arrived husband-to-be with a glowing adulation comparable only to the Silver King's reverence for his treasure chest, Elisa projects hyperbolic fantasies of American modernity that, given what we know about the laconic aspiring bard of the seas, seem rather out of proportion to the fellow's actual ambitions: "At arm's length Elisa surveyed him, out there on the porch with his straw valise, and fastidious American clothes. How he was going to revolutionize the life of this peasant village!"[92] Elisa's entangled desires for the legal-moral contract of marriage and the economic stimulus of U.S. capital intensify in the story's concluding wedding ceremony, which turns into a kind of potlach for the distribution of diverse cultural and material goods acquired in the migratory circuits of the banana trade. If Elisa was impressed with Salambo's American clothes, she is practically bowled over by the Silver King, who decides to bestow his blessings on the newlyweds by joining the post-wedding meal in their "dingy hut."[93] The competing models of Black migrant masculinity performed on the steamboat now commence a silent battle for Elisa's affections under the guise of matrimonial ritual. In the short walk from steamboat to village the Silver King's vernacular suddenly accrues a new and exaggerated value: "Another man, and not a mere man, but an *American*, talking the glorious language of the United States!"[94] Being a disenchanted materialist, however, the King also comes bearing more tangible gifts:

Standing up, the Silver King extracted from his bosom, his coat pockets, his vests, his shoe tops, his waist, his sleeves, one by one, knives, forks, spoons, platters. Never in all their lives did those humble peasant folk see such an assemblage of precious metal. Silver! Never in all their lives did they see such treasures that glittered in the candlelight like the emblazoning rays of the morning sun. It dug up in the retrospective mind of the padre lurid tales of the English pirate Morgan and

[92] Walrond, "The Silver King," 295.

[93] Ibid., 296.

[94] Ibid.

his bloody conquest of the Spanish Main. It will go down in history, this spending array of silver as Elisa's wedding, the padre decided. Silently he sent up praises to the Lord. [95]

In the Padre's "retrospective mind" the value of the King's silver collection is radically decontextualized from its function as cutlery for white diners on a steamboat. What the Padre sees first in this sudden bonanza is not a cutlery collection but the raw material itself, an "assemblage of precious metal," as though it were newly extracted from Guatemala's Escobal mine. His "retrospective" filter thus achieves a kind of material and historical reverse engineering, revealing the internal architecture of plunder, extraction, and primitive accumulation congealed in the value of a luxury amenity. For the padre, to receive this treasure seems almost tantamount to an act of historical reparation, a simultaneously material and symbolic recompense for a legacy of British colonial piracy and predation.

The inflated expectations and inchoate desires projected onto Salambo and the Silver King reach their apogee in the comically absurd final dinner scene, as the former's poetry and the latter's cutlery collaboratively radiate the promise of a better brighter future. Salambo reads volume after volume of his "soul poems" to Elisa, who, even as she lets her betrothed "saturate her soul with his ecstatic poetry," also "surreptitiously feel[s] the weight of the Silver King's silver spoons."[96] The comic effect of the scene depends on the hyperbolic exaggeration of a certain highly conventional patriarchal-colonial script in which the "traditional" peasant-native-woman passively and gratefully welcomes the boons of global market exchange, the remittances of modernity procured by migrant worker men abroad. The problem is that neither Salambo's poetry nor the Silver King's silver are in fact able to materialize the value they symbolically

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 297.

incarnate. The story ends with the deflationary realization that the King, in fact, does not intend to part with "his" silver, which after all is not even his, but the ship's: "Suddenly lifting the lamp off the table, the Silver King gathered up the silver, table-cloth and all, and tied it up in a bundle. He even ducked under the table to see if a stray fork had got under there. No, every piece was accounted for all right, and, tying it at the top, coolie fashion, he grasped it, and said good-by."[97] Elisa's family, far from benefactors of the imperial fruit trade that has linked their village to the circuits of a larger circum-Caribbean migratory sphere, have thus only received the fleeting pleasure derived from the use of a borrowed luxury item generally reserved for upper class whites. As the Silver King departs the hut to report for morning duty, Elisa, "dumfounded at the catastrophic fall of her hopes of having that silver to flaunt in the faces of the local señoritas, sat there speechless, staring open-mouthed at the bare, hard, top of the table."[98] While the tone and political stakes of the scene are radically different from those of Beryl's autopsy, we might note a structural parallel between the narrative function of silver at the end of "The Silver King" and that of marl stone at the conclusion of "Drought": In both cases, the partial, uneven incorporation of a peasant household into circuits of capitalist valorization produces confusion about the ontological status of a material object. The conflictual political valences of silver, like those of marl, are shaped by the material histories of British imperial extraction and accumulation that uncannily resurface in the not-yet-postcolonial present.

Though Walrond himself dismissed the "Silver King" as a "disgusting darky story," moreover, the text poses questions about the transferability of U.S. cultural forms that persist in his later "highbrow" Caribbean stories. As Davis observes, the deflationary epiphany that

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

concludes the story is also a moment of generic subversion: “But the story is a trickster tale, and just as Silver King gets the best of Salambo in the end, so Walrond engages in a form of narrative tricksterism, his ‘disgusting darky story’ exhibiting popular stereotypes yet subverting them. It turns out that the Silver King is only apparently ridiculous; he is sophisticated beyond his modest station.”[99] Indeed, Walrond’s adoption of “darky” tropes in “The Silver Kind” is clearly more self-consciously ironic than his own self-deprecating comment suggests. At the same time, however, that subversion itself takes place within an asymmetrical context of imperialist exploitation that rather severely blunts its progressive edge. To overstate Silver King’s status as a trickster risks eliding both structural constraints imposed on him as an exploited worker on a U.S. steamboat and the hierarchal core-periphery relations his “trick” is itself designed to exploit. It is possible to read the Silver King himself as enchanted by the masquerade he performs in his visit to the Elisa’s family. He too enjoys the fiction of prior possession implied by the bestowal of the gift, a fiction shattered when he is compelled to report for duty. Guatemala affords the Silver King an opportunity to play out a fantasy of proprietary ownership over the object of his labor. More broadly, then, the story is concerned with the structural asymmetries that shape the global diffusion of African American “folk types,” themselves undergoing a process of cultural transformation shaped by rapidly developing U.S. culture industries, throughout the hemisphere. The Silver King’s “trick” is a trick played upon the colonial periphery. By repositioning an updated proletarian iteration of the “darky” trope within transnational commodity flows shaped by U.S. imperial fruit monopoly, Walrond self-consciously stages what we might think of as the “uneven cultural exchange” of Black hemispheric modernism. His embarrassment over having written a “disgusting darky story”

[99] Davis, *Eric Walrond*, 106.

might thus be understood within the broader context of his anxieties as an Afro-Caribbean artist participating in an African American cultural renaissance. His representation of Elsie and Salambo as naïve dupes of U.S. empire and European culture, to be sure, itself reproduces colonial cultural and gendered hierarchies. However, these characterizations also reflect asymmetries that exceed Walrond's authorial control. The contest between the Dunbar-citing Silver King and bowdlerized English lyricism of Salambo implicitly poses the question: Is it possible in the 1920s to imagine a Caribbean literary revival that breaks from the cultural hegemony, not only of Europe, but also of the U.S.?

*The Specters of Unwaged Caribbean Women's Work*

I have been suggesting thus far that semi-proletarian form develops, neither in a political vacuum nor out of a stroke of sovereign authorial brilliance, but instead within asymmetrical hemispheric and global systems of cultural and commodity flows shaped both by layered legacies of empire and by the continuity of imperial predation in the present. From the dawn of the twentieth century through the 1930s, Black Caribbean workers were caught between the collapsing sugar economies of their native islands and the fluctuating opportunities for seasonal and temporary employment fostered by U.S. imperial-capital.[100] *Tropic Death*, as we have seen, begins with an autopsy for Barbadian sugar. It concludes, meanwhile, with a young West Indian boy called Gerald—a surrogate for Walrond himself—bidding his father, who has contracted leprosy, goodbye in the Panama Canal Zone. The tragic bookends of the collection chart a world historical transition: *Tropic Death* is, among other things, the chronicle of a world system caught in "the interregnum between the dissolution of one kind of European world-ordering imperialism

[100] Putnam, *Radical Moves*.

and the consolidation of a new kind of US-Soviet imperialism in its place."[101] Michelle Stephens captures the epochal scale of the global politico-economic shift depicted in Walrond's text when she notes that "For Caribbean modernists observing the Panama Canal project, the United States was building the bridge between the European imperialist past and a new, modern, imperialism of international trade and capitalist development for the future, a bridge between what had been the age of empire and would become the American Century."[102] Stephens contends that Walrond's text registers this pivot from European to American global hegemony by narrating the subsumption of Caribbean labor by American capital. In addition to the transition from the European imperialist to the American imperial future, then, Walrond's stories "clearly represent a peasantry undergoing proletarianization, often mirrored symbolically in the simultaneous transformation of Caribbean space within 'the Zone' of the Panama Canal."[103]

In support of her suggestion that Walrond represents a "peasantry undergoing proletarianization," Stephens cites a passage close to the end of "Tropic Death," the semiautobiographical story that closes the collection. The passage is extracted from a scene at the Canal Zone's Sixth Street Mission, a local branch of the Plymouth Brethren Church, which Walrond himself attended as a young boy. In the story, the Mission assembly initiates Gerald into the cultural traditions and extranational social networks of the British West Indian diaspora. "By way of the Sixth Street Mission," we are told, "his mother rooted religion in his soul. Every night he was marched off to meeting":

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[101] Joe Cleary, 'Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System'. Modern Language Quarterly 73.3 (2012): 255-68.

[102] Michelle Stephens, "Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* and the discontents of American Modernity" in *Prospero's Isles: The Presence of the Caribbean in the American Imaginary*, edited by Diane Accaria-Zavala and Rodolfo Popelnik (Oxford: Macmillan, 2004), 172.

[103] Ibid., 170.

There, he'd met the dredge-digging, Zone-building, Lord-loving peasants of the West Indies on sore knees of atonement asking the Lord to bring salvation to their perfidious souls. In the isles of their origin they were the tillers of the soil—the ones to nurture cane, and water sorrel, stew cocoanuts and mix Maube—now theirs was a less elemental, more ephemeral set of chores. Hill and vale, valley and stream gave way to wharf and drydock, dredge and machine shop. Among the women the transfiguration was less brilliant. Dull. The "drops" and cakes and foods and pops vended to the serfs and squatters on insular estates found a husky-throated market at the ends of the pay car lines.[104]

"Proletarianization" is certainly an adequate enough descriptor for the historical transition represented in the first half of this passage. Indeed, if we were (as Stephens does in her extract) to excise the last three sentences and restrict the Sixth Street Mission assembly to the "Lord-loving Peasants" who now depend on the "ephemeral chores" of the "wharf," "drydock," "dredge" and "machine shop," there would be little reason to dispute the notion that the passage offers an account, as Stephens' puts it, of the "full economic transition" to "modern capitalism."[105] However, the transfiguration that occurs—or fails to occur— "among the women" somewhat complicates things. If the men have transitioned from "tillers of the soil" to industrial wage laborers, women's practices of petty production and micro-entrepreneurship have remained more or less intact.

Walrond's casual reference to the "cakes and foods and pops vended to serfs and squatters on insular estates" evokes the figure of the West Indian "higgler," a petty trader who engages in household production for sale in a local market.[106] The place of the higgler in the West Indian gender division of labor traces back to slavery, when women marketed surplus foodstuff produced on subsistence plots. As Carla Freeman observes, "The country higgler has

[104] Eric Walrond, "Tropic Death," 186.

[105] Michelle Stephens, "Eric Walrond's Tropic Death."

[106] See Winnifred R. Brown-Glaude, *Higglers in Kingston: Women's Informal Work in Jamaica*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011.

been a powerful figure in Afro-Caribbean history, most often depicted as a woman who embodies local economic ingenuity and female independence…She signifies a femininity that is at once that of a mother and a worker, a provider and a consumer, she is both the definition of 'locality' and of movement."[107] The socioeconomic liminality of the higgler is evidenced in Walrond's account of women vendors in the Canal Zone, for whom the waged migrant male workforce serves simultaneously as an income supplement and a new "husky-throated market." The West Indian women of the Canal Zone, on Walrond's account, capitalize on the market opened by the proletarianization of the men without themselves abandoning or transforming their craft. They adjust to the incorporation of West Indian men into the U.S. imperial workforce while retaining a certain autonomy as producers and income generators. The cakes and drops they market to the wage-earning men transmute the familiar "local" traditions from the isles of their origin into goods for sale at the pay car lines. The gendered division of labor in the Canal Zone, then, is also a division of the temporality of capitalist development.

It is not particularly surprising that a critical essay attempting to extrapolate large-scale early twentieth-century historical developments from *Tropic Death* would emphasize the transformation undergone by the "lord loving peasants" rather than the women vending cakes and pops. Walrond himself seems to construct a kind of gendered hierarchy of historical value by labeling the changes experienced by the women "dull" in contrast to the momentous dislocations of the proletarianized men. Nonetheless it is worth asking whether this imputed "dullness" in fact marks the relegation of "women's work" to a lower order of historical importance in Walrond's story. Here it is important to consider the wider narrative context in which the quoted passage

[107] Carla Freeman, "Mobility, Rootedness, and the Caribbean Higgler: Production, Consumption and Transnational Livelihood" in *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World*, edited by Ninna Nyberg Sørensen and Karen Fog Olwig (New York: Routledge, 2003): 63.

appears. Gerald and his mother Sarah have relocated from Barbados to the Canal Zone in order to track down the boy's profligate father Lucian, with whom they've lost touch. The Canal Zone is described in the story as "city of sores" on account of the boils and fly-infested inflammations covering the bodies of Gerald's playmates; the portentous moniker foreshadows the fate of Lucian, who contracts leprosy, abandoning the disoriented Gerald to the care and Christian tutelage of Sarah.[108] While focalized through the perspective of Walrond's biographical surrogate Gerald, "Tropic Death" is in large part the story of Sarah's frustrated efforts to keep her divided family intact. The burden falls on Sarah to sustain bonds of kinship and relations of mutual accountability between the Canal Zone and Barbados, where four of her children still reside under the guardianship of a close friend. When Sarah reminds Lucian of his responsibilities as a father, he protests "Oh, how many times I gwine heah de same old story?" Sarah retorts: "Old? It will never be old! As long as I've got breath in my body—as long as I is got my boy child to shield from de worle—from de filfth and disease of this rotten, depraved place—as long as I got my chirrun in B'bados in somebody else han'—um can't be a old story!"[109] Sarah's "old story" echoes the "dull" (non-)transformation undergone by the female higglers of the Canal Zone. Indeed, the Sixth Street Mission assembly constitutes something like an objective social correlative to Gerald's individual experience of dislocation and loss, with the "ephemeral" men and the "dull" women serving respectively as analogues for the negligent father and the protective mother. The gendered division of labor in Gerald's own family is thus symbolically mapped onto a larger uneven economic transition that transforms without displacing the dual economic structure of the West Indian semi-proletarian household.

[108] Walrond, "Tropic Death," 179.

[109] Ibid., 184.

The tensions explored in the first section of this chapter persist in Walrond's narrative of Caribbean economic development all the way through the concluding, eponymously titled story of the collection. While I agree broadly with Stephens' account of *Tropic Death* as a chronicle of inter-imperial transition, then, I would complicate the suggestion that Walrond's text emplots a unidirectional trajectory of development or "full economic transition…to modern capitalism."[110] *Tropic Death* does, to be sure, document the incorporation of male West Indian workers into an expanded peripatetic workforce, a "floating proletariat" seeking seasonal work in the banana industry, Cuban can fields, and the Canal Zone.[111] However, Walrond's text is equally interested in the affective, political, and economic pressure exerted by a countervailing tendency towards the non- or incomplete proletarianization of Caribbean women. Walrond, then, is not interested in the historical displacement or supersession of one mode of production by another so much as in their agonistic layering, juxtaposition, and inter-articulation. *Tropic Death*, even as it explores how the Caribbean is transformed by the Canal construction project and the development of inter-hemispheric circuits of labor migration, does not narrate the complete subsumption of Caribbean labor by U.S. capital, but instead documents the emergence of a distinctive Caribbean trajectory of class-formation defined by structural semi-proletarianization.

The combined structure of the semi-proletarian household, as we have seen in the case of Sissie in Walrond's "Drought," exerts contradictory real and symbolic pressures on women's reproductive labor and subsistence work. Carmen Diana Deere and other scholars analyzing the gendered divisions of labor underpinning global capitalist production have demonstrated that rural women's subsistence labor in the periphery "allows semi-proletarian male workers to sell

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[110] Stephens, "Discontents of American Modernity," 171.

[111] Marco A. Gandásegui, Alejandro Saavedra, Andrés Achong, and Iván Quintero, *Las luchas obreras en Panamá (1850-1978)* (Panam Citya: CELA, 1980), p. 8.

their labor power to capitalist units of production for less than a subsistence familial wage. Thus, women's contribution toward the maintenance and reproduction of labor power within the rural labor reserve permits the non-capitalist mode of production to absorb the costs of production and reproduction of labor power."[112] Throughout *Tropic Death*, Walrond's encoding of gender difference is shaped by what we might think of as this doubly interior-exterior status of women's work. Walrond depicts multiple combined household structures and informal labor arrangements in which women's unremunerated work, precisely because of its relative autonomy from the wage, simultaneously undergirds and exceeds colonial relations of economic dependency. The invisible incorporation of Caribbean women's unwaged labor into global circuits of extraction thus tends to trouble the past/future and country/city spatial-temporal antinomies that undergird normative unidirectional narratives of proletarianization.[113] Because of its liminal, aporetic status, women's work, even as it often drives the plots of Walrond's stories, also emerges as a barometer and projection screen for anxieties around regional political identity, cultural reproduction, and incomplete capitalist modernization. Throughout the collection Walrond deploys organicist tropes of Caribbean femininity as a natural bearer of cultural tradition and pre-capitalist "use-value," but also critically examines how the construction of female alterity itself is conditioned by the requirements of capital accumulation. *Tropic Death* thus at once anatomizes and participates in the cultural *production* of femininity as a corollary and constitutive component of Caribbean semi-proletarianization.

[112] Carmen Diana Deere, "Rural Women's Subsistence Production in the Capitalist Periphery." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8, no. 1 (April 1976): 9–17. See also: Eva Swindler, "Invisible Exploitation: How Capital Extracts Value Beyond Wage Labor," *Monthly Review* (March 2018): 29-36 and Wilma A. Dunaway, *Gendered Commodity Chains: Seeing Women's Work and Households in Global Production.* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013.).

[113] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.)

Interestingly, it is through the perspective of a peasant woman in Barbados that Walrond's collection first registers the regional impact of canal construction. *Tropic Death*'s second story, "Panama Gold," sets up a dichotomy of native-peasant-woman vs. migrant-male-returnee in some ways reminiscent of Elisa and Salambo in "The Silver King." Unlike Elisa in the earlier story however, the protagonist in "Panama Gold" is utterly uninterested in the overtures of a recently returned "Silver Worker." Ella, who owns half an acre of fertile land yielding an abundance of diverse crops, has no desire whatsoever for her peasant village to be revolutionized. Walrond represents Ella as the archetype of West Indian peasant autonomy and self-sufficiency, the conservator of the values of the plot: "Cast up on a bare half acre of land, Ella came to know the use of green, virgin things. Ore; green ore—spread over the land. Riotously nature peoples the earth about here…Half an acre of land, but it was not trifling stake. Inch by inch green overspread it. Corn, okras, gunga peas, eddoes, *tannias*, tomatoes—in such a world Ella moved."[114] Walrond employs a romantic pastoral tropology that links the femininity to the natural cycles of the harvest. At the same time, Ella's innovative experimentation with various instruments and strategies of cultivation seems designed to disrupt clichés of the peasant "folk" as naïve or innocent of modernity. Ella's "world," while insular, has been consciously and deliberately developed with locally rooted skills and knowledges. Her relation to Barbadian ecology, moreover, is not constricted by proprietary demarcations of space. The divide between Ella's "domain" and the wider community is blurred when she plants roses and artfully deposits sea crab shells on the walk from the Lower Side to the gap. The multiple figures of land Walrond employs to describe Ella's space—"heath," "domain," "earth"—evoke Wynter's account of the

[114] Eric Walrond, "Panama Gold," 40-41.

plot as Earth, a realm of social-ecological fecundity autonomous from and resistant to the plantation regime of property values.[115]

When the "Panama Man" Mr. Poyer sets up shop in the village, then, he appears less as a savior than a threat. Poyer's role in the narrative is conditioned by his social function as a seller of commodities, a necessary if emphatically minimal supplement to Ella's self-grown crops. When Ella realizes she has run out of salt, she first asks her neighbor Lizzie to borrow a pinch. Lizzie, having also just run out, suggests Ella go up the road to "Missah Poyah's shop":

"Missah who?"
"Missah Poyah, no."
"Who 'im are—why he come from?"
"Palama, soul."
"Palama?"
"Yes."
"An wha' he doin' heah?"
"He open a shop, soulee."
"Oh, I see."
"Yes, chile, he are a Palama man."[116]

The mix of suspicion and intrigue surrounding the figure of the "Palama man" in local village gossip is only amplified by the bodily trauma Poyer has sustained as a canal digger. "An' oh, Ella, he got one leg—" "Yo don't say!" "Deed he is! Got it cut off on de canal—"[117] When Ella visits the shop, she overhears Poyer proudly relating the story of his dismemberment and the

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid., 38.

[117] Ibid.

financial windfall that followed: “I mek dem pay me! Deed I dids! Says to dem, ‘pay me, or be Christ you’ll stan de consequences.’ ‘Pay me,’ I says, ‘or I’ll sick de British bulldog on all yo’ Omericans!’”[118] Poyer’s boasting suggests an exaggerated confidence in the British Empire’s influence in the Canal Zone: “Pay me? Man, yo should o’ see how fas’ dey pay me! Five hundred pounds!...Man, I wuz ready to sick Nelson heself ‘pon dem. At a moment’s notice, me an’ de council wuz gettin’ ready fo’ ramsack de Isthmus and shoot up de whole blasted locks! Hell wit’ de Canal! We wuz gwine to blow up de dam, cut down de wireless station an’ breck up de gubmint house! If dey didn’t pay me fo’ my foot!”[119] The financial compensation Poyer receives for the loss of his leg reflects the duality of the Canal Zone in the Caribbean imaginary as a space of imperial super-exploitation and trauma on one hand, and rapid wealth accumulation on the other. Poyer’s store, itself the product of capital acquired in exchange for his dismemberment, thus figures commercial development as imperial amputation. The physical impairment of the Panama Man stands in contrast to Ella’s agility: “Her strides were typical of the West Indian peasant woman—free, loose, firm…No stones defied her free, lithe approach. Left foot to right hand, right hand to left foot.”[120] Walrond’s juxtaposition these conventional West Indian “types” reproduces a cultural conflict rooted in the plot-plantation antinomy: The “Panama Gold” acquired through wage labor comes only at the cost of the bodily autonomy prized by the “West Indian peasant woman.”

Poyer’s courtship of Ella thus allegorizes the dilemmas of West Indian political and cultural identity within the context of increasing economic dependency on a rising U.S. imperial

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[118] Ibid., 43.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid., 49.

power. As Ella purchases salt, Poyer flaunts what he considers to be the masculinizing credentials of his labor in the Canal Zone: "I's a man, man…I was a brakesmen in Palama, don't fomembah dat. I wuz de bes' train hooper on de Isthmus." Unimpressed, Ella seeks to hasten the exchange, leading Poyer to mockingly ask if she's "Frighten fo' duppies." This condescending reference to local superstition clearly irks Ella. "Like I is any mamby-pamby ooman, like I ain't usta takin' care o' meself."[121] Later Poyer pursues Ella at home, hobbling "peg-step" across the gap to ask why she doesn't shop at his shop any longer. Ella bluntly rejects him: "Hey wha' you t'ink o' dat? Wha wuz I doin befo' yo' come along? Yo' t'ink I was starvin'? I look like I is starved out? Look at me good! We had plenty shops befo' yo' come along, bo."[122] The relation of economic dependency reflected in the previous scene of commercial exchange here is inverted as Ella scoffs at Poyer for "lock up yo' shop fi' come aftah one customah!" Ella rebukes Poyer for assuming that she owes him her pity or her business. In rejecting his solicitation, she thus simultaneously critiques his patriarchal paternalism and asserts the autonomy and self-sufficiency of her subsistence-based lifestyle: "T'ink dat ev'y ooman is de same. Burt yo' is a damn liar! Nutting can frighten me. All dem bag o' flour yo' a got, an dem silk shut, an dem' gold teets, an dem Palama hats, yo' a spote round heah wid—dem don't frighten me. I is a woman what is usta t'ings. I got me hogs an' me fowls an' me potatoes. No wooden foot neygah man can frighten me wot' he clothes or he barrels of cologne."[123] Ella's indignation is clearly elicited by the combination of male hubris and commercial confidence reflected in Poyer's expectation that she would return to his store at once as a customer and admiring audience for

[121] Ibid., 45.

[122] Ibid., 46.

[123] Ibid., 47.

more boastful canal zone stories. Her tirade, if it tilts into unsympathetically cruel territory with the derogatory deflation of Poyer as a "wooden foot neygah man," reads as a response to the Panama Man "type" more than Poyer himself. What she is rejecting, in other words, is the "amputation" of politico-economic dependence signified in the exchange of Poyer's leg for an insurance check. The mysterious catastrophe that concludes the story solves Ella's problem for her: As word circulates around the village of a "cane fire," she discovers that it is in fact Poyer's shop that has burnt to the ground. No answer is provided as to the fire's origins. However, the evocation of "cane fire" in such close proximity to the discovery of the burning shop, in addition to a surreal description of the sunset as a "flame" shooting "strange poetic dreams through the crinkly heads of the mule boys" across the gap, implies a disaster at once political and ecological.[124] Walrond elliptically suggests that a longer history of Black resistance to the plantation is somehow mysteriously implicated in Poyer's death. The "strange poetic dreams" of the masses themselves seem to engulf Poyer's shop, as the "Panama Gold" of the story's title is ironically displaced by the "fire and gold" of the blazing sun.[125]

If Ella represents moral and political autonomy from an ascendant U.S. empire, the women workers that appear in subsequent stories are forced to negotiate the structural devaluation of their labor as it is incorporated as an invisible input into the reproduction of a U.S.-administered migrant Caribbean labor force. In the "The Wharf Rats," a story set in the segregated "Silver Quarters" of the Canal Zone, a "hardworking patois girl" called Maffi ultimately harnesses the supernatural power of the *obeah* to seek revenge against the West Indian

[124] Ibid., 48.

[125] Ibid., 47-50.

creole family that employs her. Walrond sets the stage for the macabre tale by delineating the global division of labor structuring the Canal Zone's migrant workforce:

> Among the motley crew recruited to dig the Panama Canal were artisans from the four ends of the earth. Down in the Cut drifted hordes of Italians, Greeks, Chinese, Negroes-a hardy, sun-defying set of white, black and yellow men. But the bulk of the actual brawn for the work was supplied by the dusky peons of those coral isles in the Caribbean ruled by Britain, France, and Holland.[126]

Walrond's reminder that the "bulk of the brawn for the work" was supplied by Black Caribbean "peons" is clearly targeted towards an American audience whose historical memory of the canal construction is sanitized by imperialist hagiographies of American engineering and ingenuity.[127] Walrond's use of the designation "peon" would have conjured associations both with the regimes of coerced labor that persisted across the American South and the "peonage scandals" that shaped debates on immigration and border enforcement.[128] The term evoked anxieties around the persistence of labor-coercion in the polity, marking the spectral reappearance of a problem that should have been expunged by Anglo Saxon values and the forward march of progress.[129] The "Wharf Rats" in general seems deliberately crafted to subvert the triumphalist narratives of civilizational advancement that functioned as propaganda for U.S. hemispheric expansion. The story, however, does not adopt the conventions of social realism to contest imperialist ideology, but instead elaborates a kind of subaltern counter-mythography of the Canal Zone that draws on the cultural traditions of the exploited "peons."

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[126] Walrond, "The Whard Rats," 155.

[127] Greene, *The Canal Builders*.

[128] Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018); Kiser, *Borderlands of Slavery*.

[129] Clare Sheridan, "Contested Citizenship: National Identity and the Mexican Immigration Debates of the 1920s." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 3-35.

The ritual "Science" of obeah makes regular appearances across Walrond's corpus, serving often as a medium of inter-island cultural dialogue and exchange for transient, mobile assemblies of Black Caribbean laborers. The tradition is clearly associated for Walrond with a diasporic history of marronage and the autonomous subsistence-based Black political communities that conglomerated, as he puts it in "The Color of the Caribbean," "far from the vision or comprehension of the whites."[130] In the 1920s and '30s Obeah retained its historical associations with Black autonomy and political conspiracy against colonial rule. However, the cultural politics of Obeah also evolved in response to the dislocations and displacements of the Caribbean diaspora in the early twentieth century.[131] The practice, as Putnam observes in *Radcial Moves*, was often invoked by outside observers and colonial administrators as proof of migrant Caribbean workers' unredeemable African atavism and backwardness.[132] Meanwhile, the rituals and supernatural epistemologies of the Obeah began to serve as one of the primary indices of class difference within Caribbean communities. Putnam thus notes that "Belief in the spirit world fissured Caribbean societies along lines of class…separating 'the classes' from 'the masses,' in the language of the times."[133] Middle class Caribbeans of color "insist[ed] that obeah reflected popular ignorance, 'backwardness' that would have to be overcome for modern progress to begin."[134] Obeah became a flashpoint in debates around assimilation and mobility conditioned by class-differentiated trajectories of movement in the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere. Even as

[130] Walrond, "The Color of the Caribbean," 225.

[131] Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 49-82.

[132] Ibid., 59.

[133] Ibid., 50.

[134] Ibid., 59.

upwardly mobile middles-class Caribbean migrants sough to dissociate themselves and West Indian culture from Obeah in order to prove their fitness for assimilation in the U.S., the practice became a "lingua franca" for Caribbean migrant laborers. "As shifting patterns of employment and investment made international mobility ever more common in working-class lives," notes Putnam, "Caribbean people found in Science/Obeah a source of power that was likewise not limited by jurisdictional boundaries."[135]

In "The Wharf Rats," Walrond traces the evolution of the obeah into a Black Canal Zone counter-culture, at once drawing on the tradition's historical associations with marronage and suggesting its continued vitality as a modality of class struggle in the migratory sphere. Eighteenth-century British parliamentary depositions on the so-called "Professors of Obi" noted ominously that "A Veil of Mystery is studiously thrown over their Incantations, to which the Midnight Hours are allotted, and every precaution is taken to conceal them from the Knowledge and Discovery of the White People."[136] Walrond's peons similarly practice the Obeah in the hinterlands of the Zone, beyond the surveillance of the U.S. colonial administration:

As it grew dark, the hewers at the Ditch, exhausted, half-asleep, naked but for wormy singlets, would hum queer creole tunes, play on guitar or piccolo, and jig to the rhythm of the coombia. It was a *brujerial* chant, for *obeah*, a heritage of the French colonial, honeycombed the life of the Negro laboring camps. Over smoking pots, on black, death-black nights legends of the bloodiest were recited till they became the essence of a sort of Negro Koran. One refuted them at the price of one's breath. And to question the verity of the *obeah*, to dismiss or reject it as the ungodly rite of some lurid, crack-brained islander was to be an accursed pale-face, dog of a white. And the *obeah* man, in a fury of rage, would throw a machete at the heretic's head or—worse—burn on his doorstep at night a pyre of Maubé bark or green Ganja weed.[137]

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[135] Ibid., 62.

[136] Srinivas Aravamudan, Introduction to *Obi, or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack*, Broadview Editions (Peterborough, Ont. ; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2005): 23.

[137] Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," 67-68.

Walrond here takes on the tone of a gothic folklorist, offering a miniature ethnographic sketch of a subcultural religious practice even as he evokes the obeah's continuing uncanny power to mobilize resistance against colonial rule. Obeah is depicted as a tradition in flux, undergoing processes of revision and re-codification in response to the hierarchies and class fissures of Canal Zone society. The practice, Walrond suggests, marks the fault lines of Black transnational community, demarcating divergent strategies of cultural adaptation to U.S. imperial hegemony. Walrond's omniscient narrator, while speaking from a certain critical distance from the obeah rites, is also partially enchanted: By suggesting that the casting of a "hex" is "worse" than hurling a machete at a heretic's head, he encourages the reader to take for granted a world in which the obeah tradition is invested with material, and mortal, power.

After introducing us to the racial, cultural, and religious divisions traversing the "motley crew" of the Canal Zone, Walrond shifts to explore how these social tensions play out at the micro scale of a single Caribbean diasporic household. At the center of the tale is the family of St. Lucian emigrant Jean Baptiste, a coal passer at the Dry Dock and devoted member of the local Plymouth Brethren Church. A "man of intense piety," Babtiste's daily post-work ritual contrasts sharply with the *brujerial* chant of the ditch diggers: "After work, by the flow of a red, setting sun, he would discard his crusted overalls, get in starched crocus bag, aping the Yankee foreman on the other side of the track in the 'Gold Quarters,' and loll on his coffee-vined porch. There, dozing in a bamboo rocker, Celestin, his second wife, a becomingly stout brown beauty from Matinique, chanted gospel hymns to him."[138] Babtiste's gospel hymns and aping of the Yankee foreman signal deliberate and self-conscious opposition to the neighboring colony of Obeah practitioners. "In brief, Jean Babtiste was a religious man. It was a thrust at the

[138] Ibid., 68.

omnipresent *Obeah*. He went to 'meeting.' He made the boys go too. All hands went, not to the Catholic Church, where Celestic secretly worshipped, but to the English Plymouth Brethren in the Spanish City of Colon."[139] Walrond represents Babtiste's religious convictions as a contradictory legacy of French-English imperial rivalry in St. Lucia. Throughout the story Walrond defines obeah as a "heritage of the French colonial," and adopts *patois* as a broadly ethnic-linguistic signifier for French influence. However, rather than naturalizing an isomorphic relation of linguistic heritage and religious practice, Walrond suggests that Baptiste's embrace of Anglo religious tradition is itself a strategic response to the hierarchical cultural codes of the Canal Zone. Babtiste's religious affiliation is, in other words, also a class and cultural *politics.* Putnam suggests that the "heterogeneous French-English fringes of the Eastern Caribbean seem to have been particularly generative of supernatural power, perhaps by their very heterogeneity."[140] Both obeah practitioners and anti-obeah Plymouth Brethren adherents, Walrond implies, reflect divergent responses to a cultural heterogeneity shaped by legacies of inter-imperial rivalry. Despite the "thrust at the Obeah" implied in Babtiste's English religious piety, his own speech retains the traces of the French colonial heritage: "Like a host of the native St. Lucian emigrants, Jean Baptiste forgot where the French in him ended and the English began. His speech was the petulant *patois* of the unlettered French black. Still, whenever he lapsed into His Majesty's English, it was with a thick Barbadian bias."[141]

Walrond's introductory invocation of the "brawn" supplied by the "dusky peons" of the Canal Zone seems to conjure the labor of the ditch digger, rock cutter, or coal passer—the

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[139] Ibid., 68-69.

[140] Putnam, *Radical Moves* 61.

[141] Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," 68.

"ephemeral chores" of the migrant men, as opposed to the women who work as vendors of cakes and pops. While descriptions of rock cutting and ditch digging are scattered across the collection, however, the work that takes center stage in "Wharf Rats" is in fact performed by Maffi—an informally adopted, rarely acknowledged "black ominous Trinidad girl" who earns her keep in the Baptiste household by performing various unremunerated and otherwise neglected household tasks. If the brawn supplied by Black Caribbean male workers had been, in 1926, effaced from popular American historical memory of the construction period, the labor of an unwaged informally employed domestic servant such as Maffi was rendered doubly invisible. Perhaps it is this double invisibilization that Walrond seeks to register through his continuous analogizing of Maffi herself to a specter:

Stalking about like a ghost in Jean Batiste's household was a girl, a black ominous Trinidad girl. Had Jean Babtiste been a man given to curiosity about the nature of women, he would have viewed skeptically Maffi's adoption by Celestin. But Jean Babtiste was a man of lofty unconcern, and so Maffi remained there, shadowy, obdurate.

And Maffi was such a hardworking patois girl. From the break of day she'd be at the sink, brightening the tinware. It was she who did the chores which Madame congenitally shirked. And towards sundown, when the labor trains had emptied, it was she who scoured the beach for cockles for Jean Baptiste's epicurean palate.[142]

Maffi thus works beyond and outside the temporal rhythms of formal contract labor in the canal zone, continuing to scour the beach after the working day for the Silver Men has ended. Indeed, Maffi's household labor is itself undertaken under conditions of structural nonrecognition, suggesting a kind of tacitly accepted but never officially codified arrangement. Her subordinate position is shaped by a double displacement: Maffi is the supplement to a supplement, an auxiliary to Madam's already devalued "chores." She thus takes on the spectral position of a shadow/ghost, the trace or simulacrum of an embodied worker. Maffi disrupts the masculinized

[142] Ibid., 69.

image of labor projected in the opening paragraph, presenting something close to the obverse image of the "bulk of the actual brawn supplied" by the "dusky peons." While the latter phrasing evokes labor as an embodied, quantifiable, positively verifiable "thing," Maffi is not permitted this historical-empirical concreteness. She instead suffers the "spectralization" of women's domestic work through her (non-)incorporation as an invisible input into the reproduction of Baptiste's labor power.[143] In analogizing Maffi to a ghost, Walrond thus evokes the specters of labor that "stalk" the edges of the already suppressed history of Black labor in the Canal Zone. Echoing Gayatri Spivak's deconstructive reading of "women outside of the mode of production narrative," Walrond suggests that to recall the historical trace of Maffi's labor requires "the possibility of possession, of being haunted."[144]

Historian Joan Flores-Villalobos notes in an essay on the "Freak Letters" of the Isthmian Canal Commission that "West Indian women were particularly disquieting imperial subjects for the canal administration, since they predominantly traveled without official contracts and settled in the borderlands of the Canal Zone, traversing work and domestic space and performing necessary, though undervalued, intimate labor."[145] "Intimate labor" indeed is an apt characterization for the work Maffi performs across "The Wharf Rats" which, despite, the ominous tone projected in the opening pages, centers largely around what appears to be a relatively mundane romantic intrigue. Exacerbating the "hardworking *patois* girl's" exploitation within the Baptiste household, the story's love plot demands that Maffi function as an

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[143] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 1. publ, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[144] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 244.

[145] Joan Flores-Villalobos; " 'Freak Letters': Tracing Gender, Race, and Diaspora in the Panama Canal Archive." *Small Axe* 23.2.2 (July 1, 2019): 35-36.

intermediary for a series of amorous social exchanges while excluding her from participating in any reciprocated romance. Despite the quotidian and apparently innocent nature of the episodic local encounters that build up to the story's dramatic conclusion, Walrond continuously emphasizes Maffi's position at the bottom of the phenotypic, biopolitical and ethnolinguistic hierarchies that structure social relations within the Canal Zone's "Silver Quarters." As a Black Trinidadian "patois girl" Maffi, like Baptiste, embodies the creolized linguistic legacy of the French-English Caribbean. While Baptiste only *speaks* patois, however, in Maffi's case the term functions as something closer to an ethnic signifier. Maffi *is* patois, and her status as "a patois girl" effectively reduces her to the "unlettered French black" from which Baptiste wishes to but cannot fully dissociate. At the same time, Maffi's "ominous" Blackness contrasts markedly with the "stout brown beauty" of Celestin and the "pretty, opaque" Maura, the daughter of the Tortola mulatto who lives in the cabin next door.[146]

As Stephen Knadler observes in his reading of "The Wharf Rats," Maffi and Maura represent opposed models, not only of Black Caribbean femininity, but of "transnational racial subjectivity."[147] Walrond sets up a series of parallels and juxtapositions between the two figures that mark them as antagonists, although their conflict never materializes as a direct or explicit confrontation. While the "long, black figure" of Maffi "stalk[s] about like a ghost" in Baptiste's home, Maura's golden complexion allows her to "pass" as a "native *senorita*" in Colon.[148] The contrast between Maura's "golden complexion" and Maffi's phenotypic Blackness thus manifest in opposed relations to Canal Zone geography. While Maura continuously strives to migrate

[146] Walrond, "The Wharft Rats," 68-70.

[147] Stephen Knadler, *Remapping Citizenship and the Nation in African-American Literature* (Routledge, 2009), 182.

[148] Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," 70.

from the Silver Quarters to the urban center, "crossing the line into Cristobal or Colon," Maffi moves in the opposite direction, from the home to the rural hinterland. "As night fell, Maffi, a long, black figure, would disappear in the dark to dream on top of a canoe hauled up on the mooning beach. An eternity, Maffi'd sprawl there, gazing at the frosting of the stars and the glitter of the black sea."[149] Considered together, Maura and Maffi's divergent trajectories of movement reflect the Canal Zone's status as a space of spatial and temporal transit, an emergent crossroads of interoceanic market exchange and historical threshold of racial capitalist modernity. If Maura gravitates towards the urban world of Colon and the possibility of transpacific cultural creolization, Maffi "disappears in the dark" of the Silver Quarters beach, located, as Walrond reminds, at the Atlantic end of the Canal. The two figures thus stand in contrapuntal relation to Black diasporic histories of migration and forced transplantation: While Maura falls in love with son of a Chinese beer seller, Maffi cultivates an intimate spiritual relation with the "specters of the Atlantic."[150]

The fateful love triangle at the story's center maps the new political economies of desire that develop within the heterogenous social world of the Canal Zone's "motley crew," while simultaneously revealing the imbrication of intimate sentiment with traumatic histories of empire and racial hierarchy. Maura's love for San Tie, "a flashy Chinese half-breed, son of a Chinese beer seller and a Jamaica Maroon," is bound up with a desire for social mobility that Walrond encodes as a departure from Afrocentric identity: "Of the Bantu tribe Maura would have been a person to turn and stare at. Crossing the line into Cristobal or Colon—a city of rarefied gayety—

[149] Ibid., 69.

[150] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

she was often mistaken for a native *senorita* or an urbanized Cholo Indian girl."[151] Maura's desire for San Tie is later analogized to her mother's jealousy of an "Italian wife…the lady on the other side of the railroad tracks in the 'Gold Quarters' for whom she sewed—who got a fresh baby every year and who danced in a world of silk and satins."[152] Like her mother's dreams of a good life "on the other side of the railroad tracks," Maura's romantic fantasies involve a continuous slippage between romantic and economic desire; San Tie himself appears to her less as a potential mate than a "luxury to be distantly enjoyed."[153] Maura's access to San Tie, however, depends on the "full-blooded black Philip," who, Walrond implies, aids his neighbor in her romantic pursuit out of his own affection for her. Maura's reliance on the virtuous, Christian Philip makes her dependent, by extension, on Maffi, the reliable domestic who is always there to relay the message when Philip is nowhere to be found. Maffi herself, meanwhile, harbors unreciprocated feelings for Philip. The entire affair is shot through with unacknowledged but barely concealed layers of privilege and entitlement based on hierarchies of color and class. Maffi's frustration escalates into fury as she is required to play a purely instrumental, supporting role in a Canal Zone creole love story. Philip and Maura's unconscious racialized biases against the "patois girl," meanwhile, suffuse even the most apparently harmless interactions. "All de time, Maura, Maura, me can't understand it, yes," Maffi mutters. "But no mind, me go stop it, *oui*, me go stop it, so help me." When Maffi rejects Philip's efforts to cheer her, the Christian boy's paternalistic beliefs, rooted at once in hierarchies of religion, race, and the previously discussed "spectralization" of Black women's labor, come to the surface: "Philip sighed. He was

[151] Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," 70.

[152] Ibid., 75.

[153] Ibid., 76.

a generous, good-nature sort. But it was silly to try to enlighten Maffi. It wasn't any use. He could as well have spoken to the tattered torsos the lazy waves puffed up on the shores of Coco Té."[154] Inverting Maura's fantasy of San Tie as symbol of Pacific modernity, then, Maffi appears to Philip as the dead weight of history, a corpse "puffing up" from the Black Atlantic past. Reproducing his father's disdain for the unlettered French Black, Philip at once devalues Maffi's labor and insulates himself from "curiosity" about her ominous machinations.

If the Atlantic coast serves for Maffi as a space of mystery and haunting poesis, it has a more pragmatic function for the children of Jean-Baptiste. "The Wharf Rats" of the story's title refer to Philip and Ernest, who work as copper divers down at the Atlantic side docks. Philip and Ernest have perfected a routine for incoming European and American tourists, who toss coins into the sea from their steamboats as they pass in and out of the harbor. The wharf rats thus transmute games they learned in the West Indies into a source of income, tapping into Euro-American fetishism for the spectacle of "two naked Negro boys."[155] Their performance is fraught with danger, however, for it takes place perilously close to "Deathpool—a spawning place for sharks, for barracudas!"[156] While Maffi is not physically present, moreover, her specter looms across the waters. The detritus of the French imperial legacy in Panama rusts at the bottom of the "Ebony-black" sea, suggesting the "obdurate" presence of the past in the new theater of Caribbean racial performance. Diving into the suction see, Philip passes from the new world of global commodity-exchange into the graveyard of empires: On the surface, new Euro-American cultural consumers with money to spare and a colonial appetite for "native" entertainments; in

[154] Ibid., 71.

[155] Ibid., 80.

[156] Ibid., 73.

the depths, the rust and decay of the "retiring French" and sharks fattened on the meat of local abattoirs. The boys are eaten by the sharks as the shocked steamboat audience watches from a distance. If there is any doubt that Maffi is implicated in their deaths, moreover, Walrond dispels it with the story's closing lines: "At Coco Té, at the fledgling of the dawn, Maffi, polishing the tinware, hummed an *obeah* melody. 'Trinidad is a damn fine place/ But *obeah* down dey…' Peace had come to her at last."[157]

With its pivot from the boys' doomed performance on the Atlantic coastline to Maffi's household chores and "*obeah* melody," the conclusion of "The Wharf Rats" reiterates and brings to a head the formal tensions that, I have suggested, reflect and mediate the internal contradictions of Caribbean semi-proletarianization. Maffi, the unwaged "hardworking patois" girl, subverts her figural reduction to a ghost by casting a "hex" on the wharf rats. She awakens to the dawn of a new day while Philip is swallowed by the "Ebony-Black" sea—an ironic inversion of the material and symbolic order that has thus far defined Maffi as an atavism of the dead African past, and Jean-Baptiste's boys as figures of enlightened modernity. With this story, then, Walrond takes the semi-proletarian household, emerging in his time as a basic politico-economic unit of Caribbean social organization, as a microcosm for the multiple overlapping social fissures that traverse the "dusky peons from those coral isles ruled by Britain, France, and Holland." The Baptiste household, as we have seen, is structured around divisions of language and religion that intersect with and overcode hierarchies of color and a gendered division of labor. Contained within these competing schemas of value and systems of signification, moreover, are not simply "identities" or ultimately harmonizable differences, but radically opposed, perhaps irresolvable, conceptions of the social collective. Even as it emerges as a kind

[157] Ibid., 83.

of standardized economic unit regulating the incorporation of the people of the Caribbean into a new global division of labor in the early twentieth century, then, the semi-proletarian household is, at the same time, a battleground between conflicting modes of *collective representation*.[158] It is noteworthy, along these lines, that Maffi's place of subordination and "mere supplementarity" within the household division of labor itself is itself symbolically interwoven with the world of spirits and legends of the *obeah*. Thus, it is while working as a kind of subsistence gatherer, scouring the beach for cockles for Jean-Baptiste, that Maffi seems to transition into a symbolic hinterland where land meets ocean and the working day fades into "eternity." The semi-proletarian short story thus marks a space of narrative convergence and conflict between the "ephemeral chores" of the new transnational migrant laborer and this atemporal realm of myth, legends, and ghosts.[159]

[158] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 69.

[159] Walrond, "The Wharf Rats," 69.

## Chapter 2: "Playt'ing of a Will": Claude McKay and the Poetics of Peasant Dispossession

It is difficult to think of a poet whose critical reception has been more passionately animated by ideological struggle than Claude McKay. The controversies that have reproduced McKay as an object of critical inquiry in African American, Caribbean, and Black Atlantic literary studies originate in the "wars of position" to which his poetry was conscripted, even in his own moment, and even against his own professed intention.[1] The sonnet "If We Must Die," whose ambiguous first-person plural assembled multiple constituencies from its publication in 1919 through the WWII, also marks the onset of what we might call the "McKay wars." From the moment the poem, in McKay's words, "exploded out of" him on a Pennsylvania Railroad dining car during the Red Summer of 1919, the referent of its collective "we" has been a subject of contestation; one could indeed chart a family tree of early twentieth century Black radical political tendencies through the reception history of "If We Must Die," which appeared first in Max Eastman's socialist magazine *The Liberator* but was republished in Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*, A. Philip Randolph's *The Messenger*, Cyril Briggs' *The Crusader*, and, years later, in George Padmore's *The Negro Worker*.[2] The battle lines of the McKay wars were drawn already

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[1] Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 168.

[2] For McKay's account of the composition of "If We Must Die," see Claude McKay and Gene Andrew Jarrett, *A Long Way from Home*, Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the Americas (MELA) (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 29–30. As William J. Maxwell suggests, "A book can and should be written on the history of the reception and appropriation of this sonnet, McKay's most influential, over a century of world war, revolution, and colonial resistance." See Claude McKay and William J. Maxwell, *Complete Poems*, The American Poetry Recovery Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 332. W.A. Domingo's opening editorial for *The Messenger's* "Riot Number" helped set the tone for this political reception history by adopting the sonnet's title as a headline. Domingo's exegesis of the poem elaborated the implications of the new Black movement: "If death is to be their portion, New Negroes are determined to make their dying a costly investment for all concerned. If they must die they are determined that they shall not travel through the valley of the shadow of death alone, but that some of their oppressors shall be their companions." See *The Liberator*, (July 1919): 21; *The Messenger*, "Riot Number," ed. A

in the scene of the poem's inaugural performance. In his autobiography *A Long Way From Home* McKay recalls reading "If We Must Die" to the members of his crew during the Red Summer, as the Great War gave way to "the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white."[3] Withholding any account of his own authorial motives, McKay instead relinquishes the political semiosis of "If We Must Die" to his agitated audience, who immediately weaponize the poem as an anthem for the "little wars" of 1919. One crewmember suggests that McKay read the poem at Liberty Hall, headquarters of the burgeoning Marcus Garvey movement. "As I was not uplifted with his enthusiasm for the Marcus Garvey movement," McKay recalls, "yet did not like to say so, I told him truthfully that I had no ambition to harangue a crowd."[4] Yet harangue he did whether he willed it or not, and the Garveyite on the train was only the first of many to congregate a mass movement as the collective subject of the sonnet's exhortation. The decentering of McKay's authorial control is therefore primary to the production of "If We Must Die" as a politically meaningful speech act, rather than a distortion that occurs in the process of its circulation across discrepant scenes of public address. "I was transformed into a rare instrument and electrified by the great current running through the world," McKay notes in his recollection of a reading for the Soviet Union's Red Army, "and the poem popped out of me like a ball of light and blazed."[5] Indeed, as his habitual adoption of the passive voice in his accounts of poetic creation suggests,

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Philip Randolph (September, 1919): 4; *The Crusader* (September, 1919): 7; *The Negro Worker* (July 15, 1932): 32. While the 1919 editions of *The Negro World* have not survived, the records of the West Indian Garveyite poet J.R. Ralph Casimir confirmed the poem appeared there. J.R. Ralph Casimir Papers, Sc MG 110. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York Public Library), NY, New York, USA.

[3] McKay and Jarrett, *A Long Way from Home*, 29.

[4] Ibid., 30.

[5] Ibid., 162.

McKay's distinctive contribution to Black revolutionary aesthetics also marks a peculiar episode in the history of the poetic will.

While many critics have complained about McKay's failure to wholeheartedly embrace the various forms of literary radicalism he nonetheless also helped to foster, it is perhaps worth asking how our perspective might shift if we turn this formulation on its head: Might there not be, that is, a positive relation between the manifold trajectories of McKay's radicalization and the instability of his authorial intention? The problem of compromised agency has long haunted the McKay wars, which have produced several paranoid readings of external influences that are taken to stymie or distort an authentic motivating political consciousness. In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* Harold Cruse describes McKay's submission to Communist influence as a failure, emblematic of the broader Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, to commit to a project of Black cultural self-determination. Cruse argues that the political upheaval of the 1920s created a situation of "aimlessness, conflict, and confusion" for a Black creative intellectual class who lacked the will and the resources to harness the period's nascent nationalism into a conscious politico-aesthetic program. McKay, while expressing reservations about the stultifying effects of Jewish Communist leadership on the development of the Black movement, also avoided the necessary confrontation. His retreat from his post at *The Liberator* reflected the "weak-kneed, nonpolitical, non-committal naivete which was characteristic of many of the Negro intellectuals," demonstrating that "the trends of the 1920s had thrown the Negro intelligentsia onto the cultural stage in an intuitive and romantic outpouring of 'soul,' but without the depth of philosophical insight that would have enabled them to grasp the implications of their movement."[6] Critics interested in proving the authenticity and durability of McKay's communist

[6] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 1st Quill ed (New York: Quill, 1984), 51.

sympathies, meanwhile, insist on the *agential* character of his participation in the left-wing literary sphere. William Maxwell suggests that the impulse to search for evidence of nefarious white control over Black cultural production risks "denying African-American literary Communists what it would finally seem to prize: a historically consequential self-direction."[7] Yet attempts to verify the sincerity of McKay's Marxism have yielded their own paranoid readings of distorting external influence, this time of the government officials whose relentless surveillance finally impressed upon the rebel sojourner the need to conceal his radical affiliations. Drawing on McKay's FBI file, Gary Holcomb argues in *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* that McKay's "repudiation" of Communism *in A Long Way From Home* was an act of self-censorship designed to placate the colonial authorities, and thus "a confessional capitulation to crushing hegemony."[8] While Holcomb is manifestly opposed to Cruse, then, we might note a basic homology between their respective interpretive procedures: Each critic combs the McKay archive for evidence testifying to a real self-determined political consciousness which is then thwarted by some external agent—Michael Gold in one case, the FBI in the other—whose influence can in turn be discerned as the operative force behind any apparent deviation from the writer's original, authentic political commitment. McKay may not have wanted to harangue a crowd, but that hasn't stopped McKay's audience from wanting to be harangued.

This chapter joins the crowded critical debate on the problem of McKay's politics, not by claiming him for one or another movement, party, or organization, but by questioning the model of politico-poetic agency on which this discourse has typically depended. I take no issue, to be

[7] Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*, 5.
[8] Gary Edward Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 33.

clear, with the critical desire to claim McKay for any given political tradition, since his heterogenous corpus patently incites such desire. Nor do I dispute the incontrovertible fact that McKay's career was impinged upon and constrained by a variety of external institutions and social forces. What I wish to complicate, rather, is our understanding of the relation between these two aspects of McKay's career—authentic political expression on one hand, distorting external constraint on the other. While combatants of the McKay wars have posited various loci of politico-poetic agency that are in turn stymied by external power apparatuses, I want to suggest that McKay's poetry exerts urgent and sustained pressure on the undertheorized ideal of a univocal, rational, and self-determining political will that animates these critiques. Echoing David Scott's account of Toussaint Louverture as a tragic "conscript" of colonial modernity, I suggest that McKay's poetry at once responds to and facilitates a transformation of "the conceptual and ideological conditions in which a willing subject [is] constituted" in the Black Atlantic world.[9] Through his efforts to give poetic form to historical processes of Caribbean and African American class formation at the dawn of the twentieth century, I argue, McKay explores the heteronomy of the will, not simply as an impediment, but as an animating condition of modern Black political struggles.[10] Rather than excavate an authentic self-determined political consciousness from beneath the distorting mediations of external agents, then, I want to think about the ways in which the production of an agential political will in McKay's poetics itself appears as an alien incursion, destabilizing our sense of the relation between agency and its

[9] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 122.

[10] According to Immanuel Kant, the "Heteronomy of the Will" is the "Source of All Spurious Principles of Morality": "If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere else than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law…heteronomy always results. The will in that case does not give itself the law; instead the object, by means of its relation to the will, gives the law to it." See Immanuel Kant and Mary J. Gregor, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

putative negation. The radicalization of McKay cannot be finally disentangled from what we might call his "dispossessive lyric subjectivation:[11] In this process of political poesis, an emergent sense of historical agency presents itself to the lyric subject as coextensive with, rather than anathema to, an "ensemblic mediation" of forces and voices exorbitant to the poet's individual will.[12] By reframing the problem of McKay's poetic agency in this way I do not intend to suggest that McKay had no vision of collective emancipation or that his liberatory impulses were always already contained by racial capitalist hegemony. Indeed, to recognize the contradictions of agential subject formation in McKay's work allows us to better appreciate the remarkable range and plurality of emancipatory expressions across his corpus. To reconceive the will of the poet as heteronomous is, by extension, to see it as heterogeneous:[13] If we loosen our attachment to McKay as a heroic self-determining subject, I hope to show, we can better attune ourselves to the cacophony of struggles that take poetic form in his work.

Critical combatants in the McKay wars all agree that McKay's poetry functioned as a kind of discursive crossroads, channeling and articulating a multitude of historic forces that would ultimately crystallize into the great political movements of the twentieth century.[14] Part of

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[11] The critique of Kant's sovereign self-legislating will has a long history in the Black Atlantic world. This phrase, and the entirety of the chapter, reflects ideas absorbed in Christopher Taylor's course on Voluntary Slavery. I am indebted as well to Taylor's readings of ex-slaves' spiritual autobiographies as texts that "relate the formation of a subjectivity opposed to the self-possessive subject of the colonial Atlantic world." I also draw throughout on Fred Moten's thinking about the "dispossessed and dispossessive fugitivity" of the Black Radical Tradition. See Christopher Taylor, "Divine servitude against the work of man: dispossessive subjects and Exoduses to and from property," *Religion* 50.2 (2020): 228. See also Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4.2 (2004): 269-310.

[12] I here follow Moten's account of the "voicing and re-voicing of ensemble": "The essence of that ethics is mediation, the ensemblic mediation of improvisation, which is not arrested in or by the passage, (dis)appropriative event, or death of the individual body, and which, as such, is not held within the determination of any (impossible) exclusively singularized agency." See Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," 282.

[14] In addition to critical treatments mentioned above, see Addison Gayle, *Claude McKay: The Black Poet At War.* [1st ed.]. Detroit, Mich.: Broadside Press, 1972. William J. Maxwell, "Introduction: Lyric Poetry in the Age of Cataclysm" in *Complete Poems*; Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984); Winston James and Claude McKay, *A Fierce*

the reason there's a war is that McKay's politics were irreducibly polyvocal: No pure political articulation exists within his corpus that isn't crosscut by some countervailing impulse or tendency. Yet the heterogeneity of McKay's corpus is not itself a sufficient explanation for a critical conflict of such tenacity, for this only begs the question of why such heterogeneity should appear, to the critical defender of one or another political tradition, as a problem: Why, that is, does the simultaneity of multiple political and aesthetic tendencies in a single corpus appear, not simply as a plurality, but as a contradiction? I would suggest that the reason critics have often felt compelled to take a fundamentally defensive stance in their readings of McKay lies, somewhat paradoxically, in the normative conceptions of political-cultural agency that underwrite their own scholarly and political commitments. While critics have identified a wide variety of political dispensations in McKay's writing, from anarchism through "Queer Black Marxism," it will be helpful for my purposes here to focus on two particularly influential politico-critical traditions:[15] Caribbean Nationalism and Proletarian Internationalism. These two movements, while they have combined and intersected with one another in a variety of institutional and ideological articulations, have also given rise to divergent strands of McKay criticism.[16] Indeed, Caribbean Nationalism and Proletarian Internationalism have each produced

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*Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London ; New York: Verso, 2000).

[15] For an account of anarchist tendencies in McKay's work see Joel Nickels, "Claude McKay and Dissident Internationalism," *Cultural Critique* V. 87 (Spring 2014): 1-37. See Holcomb's *Code Name Sasha* for a discussion of McKay's Queer Black Marxism and radical sexual politics.

[16] In the Caribbean literary criticism of the 1960s and '70s, McKay was often retroactively named a pioneer or progenitor of Caribbean cultural nationalism. This work, unsurprisingly, focused on McKay's Jamaican dialect poetry and the later novel *Banana Bottom*. See George Robert Coulthard: *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970); Anthony Boxhill, "The Beginnings to 1929" in *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1995), 30-44. For a critical account of the ideological limits imposed in this retroactive nationalist canonization of McKay see Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London: Routledge, 2006). For the representatives of the "Proletarian Internationalist" school see Holcomb, *Code Name Sasha* and Maxwell, *New Negro: Old Left*.

what we might fairly describe as discrete and relatively autonomous critical traditions, each focusing on a particular segment of McKay's corpus, and each arguing for McKay's exemplary or representative status within a larger affiliated canon of works. At the same time, partisans of each tradition have felt compelled at one time or another to explain McKay's deviation from or disidentification with the model of political agency—the program of "historically consequential self-direction"—operative within their respective movements. For Kamau Brathwaite, one of the great partisans of the Caribbean Nationalist strand of McKay criticism, McKay exemplifies the stultifying effects of Western cultural hegemony on the creative development of a Caribbean "nation language." "We want to be universal, to be universally accepted," writes Braithwaite. "But it's the terrible terms meted out for 'universality' that interests me. In order to be 'universal,' McKay forshook his nation language, forshook his early mode of poetry and went to the sonnet."[17] Brathwaite in this essay seeks to advance a politico-critical project that identifies "historically consequential self-direction" with the cultivation of a distinctive and autochthonous Caribbean culture. McKay's abandonment of Jamaican dialect for the sonnet therefore looks to Brathwaite like capitulation to external constraints, a fall from a condition of historical agency to one of political and cultural subordination. "McKay," writes Brathwaite, "allowed himself to be imprisoned in the pentameter; he did not let his language find its own parameters."[18]

For McKay, of course, the choice between Jamaican dialect ballads and Standard English sonnets did not appear simply as a choice between cultural self-determination on the one hand and cultural subjugation on the other. Indeed, McKay registered considerable ambivalence about both linguistic options. In *The Negroes in America*, an early study of the so-called "Negro

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[17] Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[18] Ibid.

Question" commissioned by Leon Trotsky during McKay's sojourn in the Soviet Union, McKay dwells at considerable length on the choice Black writers of his time face between dialect and Standard English.[19] We have seen in the introduction that McKay played a crucial role in internationalizing the COMINTERN's approach to the "Negro Question" at the fourth congress. Though focused primarily on the U.S., *The Negroes in America* also gestures towards a transnational scale in the chapters on literature and aesthetics.[20] The text is indeed noteworthy in part for its attempt to apply historical materialist methods to the analysis of Black diasporic cultures. *The Negroes in America* may be read in this regard as a document of Black Labor Internationalism, a literary corollary to McKay's speech on global uprisings of the Black working classes. By linking the formal dilemmas of Black aesthetics with historical processes of class formation across the diaspora, moreover, the text provides some clues into McKay's evolving conception of his own role as a political and poetic mediator of Black diasporic collectivity.

In a chapter called "Negroes in Literature," McKay describes Black dialect in the Americas as an evolving adaptation to historical processes of transplantation, enslavement, and subsequent patterns of capitalist development. Slave owners, notes McKay, "destroyed the tribal life of the prisoners, united groups which were alien or hostile to on another, and compelled the slaves to learn the language of their masters. This was done not only with the idea of helping the masters to understand their slaves, but also so that the latter could understand one another. As a result, an altered English language was created, which the Negro masses of America now usually

[19] Claude McKay and A. L. McLeod, *The Negroes in America*, National University Publications (Port Washington, N.Y: Kennikat Press, 1979).

[20] Ibid., 56-75.

speak."[21] Strikingly, McKay here suggests that Black intracommunal "understanding" in the Americas was itself a structural imperative of the plantation economy, a corollary to the planters' need to control and surveil their workforce. On McKay's account, in other words, it is difficult to disentangle the development of an autonomous Black American linguistic community from the historical violence of dispossession and enslavement. This is not to say that McKay simply condemns dialect as irredeemably tainted by its origins in slavery; rather, he suggests that the formation of Black community through language has also always been a process of adjustment to and negotiation with larger structures of racial capitalist power. McKay correlates regional variations of Black dialect with discrete historical stages of capitalist development: "But thanks to the great development and influence of modern American industry, the Negro dialect of the United States quickly lost its peculiarities and acquires those of the folk dialect of the proletariat. The dialect of the islands is coarser and more poetic."[22] McKay's materialist account of Black linguistic adaptation militates against any transhistorical criterion that would allow for the categorization of a given language as "agential" on one hand or "coerced" on the other. The success of Paul Dunbar's dialect poetry, McKay notes, "indicates only the fact that the spirit of the poet was in harmony with the life of the Negro workers of his period."[23] However, contra Brathwaite, McKay observes that dialect itself can become a tool for the disciplining and containment of Black artistic ambition. He rails against white critics who "approach Negro poetry of the present day with the hope of finding dialect in it…Some Negro writers attempt to satisfy this criticism, becoming imitative down to trivial details and slavishly banal."[24] From

[21] Ibid., 68.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 69.

[24] Ibid.

McKay's standpoint, in other words, the political implications of the choice between Standard English and dialect, don't only diverge from, but invert the agency-coercion binary operative in Brathwaite's analysis. If Brathwaite criticizes McKay for allowing himself to be "imprisoned by the pentameter," McKay would counter that his decision to adapt classic English literary forms was motivated precisely by his desire to avoid imprisonment by dialect.

Of course, a critic committed to Brathwaite's program of Black cultural self-determination might point out that McKay's very choice to locate the possibility for Black cultural creativity in Standard English was itself a submission to external constraints, a compromise with the "terrible terms meted out for 'universality'." Such a critic might pursue an argument along the lines of Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and suggest that McKay, in writing a book for Leon Trotsky, was constrained by the ideological context of the Soviet Union, that he lacked the will to counterpose a project of Black aesthetic decolonization against the false universalism of the proletarian literature movement. Indeed, such a critic could easily find evidence to support such a line of argument in McKay's corpus: McKay does at various times describe Marxism, proletarian literature, and the Soviet Union as impediments to the full flowering of Black creative potential (these statements, as we have seen, have themselves in turn been subject to paranoid readings of counterrevolutionary conspiracy).[25] My point is not that such a critic would be wrong per se in describing McKay's transition to Standard English as symptomatic of political constraints over which McKay himself exerted little control; indeed, my purpose here is not to arrive at a definitive account of a sovereign political Will that would allow us to categorize McKay's various mutually contradictory statements on dialect, Standard

[25] See McKay's later poetry, his various criticisms of Communist party functionaries and pedantic Marxists in Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970); *Romance in Marseille* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020); *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940), and *A Long Way From Home*.

English, Marxism, or any other topic into "agential" and "coerced" forms of speech. What interests me here instead is precisely the co-presence of multiple viable political readings of McKay's corpus and, more specifically, what this co-presence can tell us about the problem of political agency in McKay's poetics. What might it mean that McKay has so frequently become an agent of his own conscription, or found himself the conscript of a political movement that promised his emancipation? Does the indeterminacy of agency in McKay's career itself bear political significance? Here we might note McKay's sheer reluctance, in the chapter quoted above, to attribute any grand historical import or political value to Black dialect or standard English, although he does provisionally identify the latter as the more promising medium for African American writers in his moment. McKay indeed describes contemporary Black writers' adoption of Standard English less as an expression of historical agency or cultural empowerment than as a kind of reluctant compromise: "In the end, Negroes find sufficient expression for their feelings with the aid of the difficult and aristocratic English language."[26] "Sufficient expression for their feelings" hardly sounds like a slogan for revolutionary cultural self-determination; nor, however, does it participate in the melodramatic rhetoric of cultural "imprisonment" employed by Brathwaite. This rhetoric of imprisonment itself relies on a prior conception of agential cultural expression towards which McKay, as we have seen, is quite suspicious. He is suspicious of this model of cultural agency precisely because the Black Jamaican dialect he has "forsaken" for Standard English was itself already conditioned and mediated by social forces over which he exerted no control. This is all to say then, that a serious consideration of the nexus of power and agency in McKay's poetics must be wary of heroic narratives of revolutionary self-assertion on one hand and cautionary tales of traitorous capitulation to white hegemony on the other. It will

[26] *The Negroes in America*, 74.

be especially important for my purposes to resist the notion that the poles of freedom and coercion can be mapped onto discrete periods of McKay's career, although there are readily apparent and historically legitimate reasons for each of the politico-critical traditions I've mentioned to valorize one period over the other. I therefore take as my point of departure the recognition that McKay felt, not simply emancipated at one time and coerced at another, but a complex combination of freedom and constraint in both major periods of his creative development.

As the short account of African American literary history in *The Negroes in America* suggests, McKay saw the development of a Black literary aesthetic as inextricably bound up with historical processes of Black class formation in the Hemispheric Americas. McKay's historical materialist perspective on Black literary history, while not fully developed in the text, is intimated in his assertion that Paul Dunbar's achievement "indicates only the fact that the spirit of the poet was in harmony with the life of the Negro workers of his period."[27] This claim about Dunbar, though little more than a casual aside in the context of the chapter, embodies a theory of Black literary production with important implications for McKay's own career. Indeed, what McKay says of Dunbar would later be said of McKay himself: The notion that McKay expressed, galvanized, or "harmonized with" the Black working classes of his time has been one of the defining themes of his critical reception. To be sure, the terminology of this strain of critical evaluation has varied: Whether a critic deploys the figure of "the worker" or a broader designation such as "the people" often depends, unsurprisingly, on their political orientation vis-a-vis Marxism and Black or Caribbean Nationalism. Nonetheless, some version of the basic claim is always at stake in readings of McKay and in assessments of his legacy:  McKay was a

[27] Ibid., 69.

poet of the Black masses, and his star rose and fell in accordance with his capacity to represent and give direction to an awakening Black political consciousness.[28]

McKay, however, seems to have been less confident than later partisans of the McKay wars in his own capacity to perform such a politico-poetic function. McKay was reluctant, as we have seen, to define either Standard English or dialect as an inherently modernizing, radical or revolutionary medium of Black literary expression. This reluctance reflects his sober evaluation of the violent histories of dispossession and exploitation that underwrite the development of English as a language of Black intracommunal communication. However, there is also another, less obvious reason for McKay's linguistic ambivalence. McKay is compelled, in his survey of contemporary linguistic developments among the Black working classes, to note the differences between distinct regional variations of Black dialect. Thus, after observing that the "the Negro dialect of the United States quickly lost its peculiarities and acquired those of the folk dialect of the proletariat," McKay adds, somewhat cryptically, that "The dialect of the islands is coarser and more poetic."[29] Although McKay does not dwell on this distinction between the proletarian dialect of Black Americans and the "coarser and more poetic" dialect of Black West Indians, the implications of the distinction are nonetheless significant. How, after all, is the Black poet meant to harmonize his spirit with the "life of the Negro workers of his period" if the Black working class is composed of distinct national and linguistic communities? How does the "coarser and more poetic" dialect of the Islands impinge upon the question of Black radical aesthetics in

[28] Addison Gayle provides the most potent articulation of this idea, from the standpoint of the 1970s Black Arts movement. McKay, for Gayle, was "the first revolutionary poet, the first Black poet in America to engage in total war with the American society… Those Black poets who direct their art towards Black people in an attempt to destroy the symbolic-imagistic complex of white America, are sojourners on the path of Claude McKay." See *Claude McKay: The Black Poet At War*, 40.

[29] *The Negroes in America*, 68.

McKay's time? If the Black masses of the islands are not part of the proletariat, what is their role in Marxist programs for social transformation?

McKay, in the text of *The Negroes in America*, is less actively pursuing answers to these questions than he is haunted by them. Indeed, the underdeveloped and tentative nature of McKay's thinking here is itself instructive. If McKay can confidently proclaim that the spirit of Dunbar was in harmony with the Black workers of his time, he is far less certain about what a harmonious relation between Black poetry and the Black working class would look like in his own time. The unevenness of Black class composition impedes the confident articulation of a politico-aesthetic program, since divergent trajectories of economic development in the U.S. and the West Indies necessitate discrete processes of linguistic and literary adaptation. McKay, then, cannot simply update the Dunbar model for a new period in "the life of the Negro workers." What separates McKay from Dunbar is not simply a unilinear process of class development that transforms the collective subject with which the poet must harmonize, but a pluralization of class forces that places a new kind of pressure on this very idea of poetic "harmony." What has changed is not only the collective subject of representation but the mode of politico-poetic practice: McKay, we might suggest, marks the transition from an organicist ideal of poetic "harmony" with the working class to a practice of poetic translation between and across discrete class subject positions.

The critics who celebrate McKay as a poetic representative of the Black masses, even while recognizing the discrepancies between different periods of his career, have tended to avoid any consideration of this heterogeneity itself as a constitutive aspect of his politico-poetic practice. These critics want to see McKay in the same way that McKay saw Dunbar—as a poet whose spirit was in "harmony" with the workers of his time. Yet tacit recognition of McKay's

*disharmonious* representations of the masses appears again and again in the various apologies made for the failures and compromises of his radical poetry. As William Maxwell observes, one of the most prevalent complaints of McKay's critics has been that his verse suffers from "form-content schizophrenia." Maxwell helpfully draws out the political stakes of this pervasive line of criticism:

> Common to all the objecting parties is the sense that the modernity of McKay's verse is half-baked, split between his risky cheerleading for the radical crusades of his own era and his meek reverence for the poetic cliches of someone else's bygone century. According to these 'critics' way o' thinkin',' McKay's poems imitate the anxious revolutionaries described in Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, cloaking their break with historical wrongs in embarrassing old outfits. The world-beating New Negro borrows Shelley's clothing or even Shakespeare's, and the regular forms of dead, distant generations commence to make every new thought old again.[30]

Maxwell's allusion to the *Eighteenth Brumaire* directs our attention to the ways in which complaints about McKay's formal timidity have functioned as proxies for a complex meditation on the problem of poetic agency. Indeed, Brathwaite's argument that McKay allowed himself to be "imprisoned by the pentameter" can be taken as a literary instantiation of Marx's dictum that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."[31] It somewhat complicates matters, however, that the common critical objection to McKay's "embarrassing old outfits" encompasses mutually opposed conceptions of literary modernity. Indeed, while Brathwaite locates McKay's historical regression in his capitulation to traditional English literary forms, others have suggested that it was precisely in his departure from the straitjacket of dialect that McKay "modernized" his verse.[32] There is no

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[30] Maxwell, Introduction to *Complete Poems*, xxxi.

[31] See Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 594.

[32] See for example Josh Gosciak's account of McKay's apprenticeship with Charles Kay Ogden, inventor of the "debabelized" Basic English. Josh Gosciak, *The Shadowed Country: Claude McKay and the Romance of the Victorians* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2006). Michael North gives an instructive account of

critical consensus, then, on where and how McKay "made his own history" and in what ways he, conversely, revealed himself to be working under "circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." One critic's mode of self-determination is another critic's prison. Maxwell himself joins the fray, arguing that McKay's "mature palette of conventions represents a self-assertive choice, even a self-modernizing one…the impression of McKay as a historical recidivist holds up only insofar as we discount the progressive, internationalizing impulse of his post-Jamaican poetry."[33]

Again, I am less interested in adjudicating these competing accounts of McKay's literary agency than in asking what is at stake in the very critical desire to define a specific moment of his career as "self-assertive" or "progressive" (in implicit contrast to another period in which he was "passive" or "regressive"). What I find particularly noteworthy about the common complaint of form-content "schizophrenia" that Maxwell summarizes, as well as Maxwell's own critique of that complaint, is the importance implicitly assigned by all parties to McKay's 1912 departure from Jamaica. Indeed, this act of regional, cultural, and linguistic transplantation marks one of the key fault lines of the McKay wars. It is hardly surprising that McKay's emigration from Jamaica has functioned as a flashpoint in the struggle to define the limits and the locus of his poetic agency. After all, what was ultimately at stake in the transition was not only a question of literary form and language but one of political subjectivity. The move from Jamaica to the U.S. also entailed a shift between discrete class archetypes, each of which has served at different

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these ambiguities, noting: "McKay's situation…exposes the fact that very often creole has been defined by the same forced that define the standard…Perhaps, then, there is no real conflict between the defiant subject matter and the conventional form of McKay's American poems, as is so often supposed. Perhaps the conventional form is also defiant of a modernism that had steadily identified Africans and African Americans with primitive spontaneity." Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[33] Maxwell, Introduction, xxxi.

times as an ideal subject of struggle for our two politico-critical traditions: the Jamaican peasantry and the international proletariat. While the McKay wars have not always expressed themselves explicitly as a class struggle, it can be argued that these two class strata form the historical basis for the conflict over McKay's political legacy. In *The Negroes in America* McKay already implies that these two classes require distinct strategies of literary representation in accordance with their respective processes of linguistic adaptation. This, indeed, is only one among many passages in McKay's corpus that juxtapose "proletarian" against "peasant" modes of representation, although the contrast bears distinct political inflections in different periods.[34] McKay's critical reception, as evidenced by the debate between Brathwaite and Maxwell, has thus bifurcated along the lines of a class antinomy that was already acquiring a new kind of political significance in the early twentieth century, and that McKay himself saw as a defining fault line of Black American aesthetics. On the other hand, critical frustration with McKay's compromised radicalism registers a gap between the poet's representation of these classes and the broader paradigms of cultural agency with which they have become associated. The Caribbean peasantry and the international proletariat have each appeared at different times as the historical protagonist for a particular horizon of revolutionary expectation. They have each, that is, been assigned roles as the as the privileged incarnation and vanguard of a larger emancipatory project: Caribbean self-determination, on one hand, revolutionary communism on the other.[35] We might speculate, then, that the McKay wars arise more or less directly from McKay's

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[34] These will be discussed in more detail below. See Claude McKay, "A Negro to his Critics," *New York Herald Tribune* (March 6, 1932). See also discussions of proletarian and peasant modes throughout *A Long Way From Home*, including Chapters 16 and 12. In the latter McKay articulates an historicist account of proletarian form that is broadly continuous with the argument in *The Negroes in America*: "I thought and still think that it is possible to have a proletarian *period* of literature, with labor coming into its heritage as the dominating social factor." See p. 111.

[35] For representations of the peasant as a proto self-determinationist subject Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* (1971), 95-102 and Robert Hill, "The Fathers of the Modern Revolt: Marcus Garvey and the Origins of Black Power," in Moving Against the System, ed. David Austin (Toronto: Pluto Press, 2018): 5-29.

historical position at the nexus of these two class strata. To the extent that McKay's poetic agency was measured by his ability to harmonize with the Black masses of his time, this agency was complicated by his efforts to navigate across politico-aesthetic paradigms developed out of discrete sites of struggle. The valorization of the peasantry and the proletariat within different politico-critical traditions has led to mutually contradictory accounts of McKay's agency, as well as conflicting assessments of his submission to external forces.

There is a risk, however, in overdrawing the distinction between McKay's "peasant" and "proletarian" modes. Combatants of the McKay wars, in ascribing either "progressive" or "regressive" valences to McKay's departure from Jamaica, obscure the multiplicity of meanings the poet himself ascribed to the transition. Close attention to McKay's corpus reveals that his "peasant" and "proletarian" periods were each crosscut by forms of consciousness and struggle typically associated with its putative antagonist. The historical process of Black outmigration from Jamaica marked McKay's verse from the onset, even in the earliest of his dialect poems; conversely, McKay's imaginative affiliation with the Jamaican peasantry exerted a powerful influence even on his "post-Jamaican" poetry. As we will see, moreover, McKay's expression of what we might call an oppositional political consciousness was rarely isomorphic with the objective articulation of class forces within a given site of struggle.[36] McKay's poetry contains, not just peasants here and proletarians there, but peasants with proletarian consciousness and proletarians with peasant consciousness; his corpus repeatedly stages the uneven mediations of its own political genres, self-consciously highlighting a struggle to articulate discrepant subject

[36] My thinking about such discrepancies and disjunctures is informed by the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, and particularly Ranajit Guha's *Elementary aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India.* Guha argues there argues for attention to "the discrepancy that is necessarily there at certain stages of the class struggle between the level of its objective articulation and that of the consciousness of its subjects." See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). 173.

positions into a unified form of collective representation. McKay's efforts to articulate the conflicting class forces of his time therefore yielded a politico-poetic practice in which collective "agency" is not so much reflected or expressed as it is subjected to a process of incessant resignification, pluralization and deconstruction.

Rather than narrate McKay's career as a sequence of shifts between self-assertion and accommodation, I suggest that we conceive of his historical position as one structured by the temporal simultaneity of multiple potential politico-aesthetic directions. McKay's poetry is best read, much like Eric Walrond's short story, as a translational practice, a continuous process of adjustment and adaptation to the vicissitudes of Black diasporic class formation. This perspective is less palatable but more revealing than the image of McKay as the poet "of" any already constituted class, because it opens to view the historicity of the process wherein classes "take form" as collective social agents. Conversely, such a perspective can reveal how the same classes lose form, undergoing processes of dissolution, fragmentation or de- and re-composition that consequently exert new pressures on available politico-aesthetic genres. Finally, and most pertinently for McKay, this notion of poetics as a practice of political translation can attune us to what Walter Rodney and many others describe as the "incomplete crystallization" of social classes in the early twentieth century Caribbean.[37] In the situation of incomplete crystallization, we might hypothesize, political subjectivity tends to be constituted on the borders between classes, rather than as the univocal expression of a single class stratum. This predicament, I would argue, is at once the condition of possibility and a source of continuous frustration for McKay's political poetics.

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[37] Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*, 1881-1905; Elizabeth Mclean Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital And Black Labor*, 1850-1930: 1 edition (Boulder: Routledge, 1987); Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*.

In what follows, I trace the development of McKay's politico-poetic practice from his years in Jamaica, where his dialect poetry was broadly understood as capturing the "articulate consciousness of the peasantry," through *Harlem Shadows*, his first American collection. For McKay, this was a period of intellectual exploration, transition, and politico-aesthetic adaptation: Between his early peasant dialect poetry, composed under the guidance of the white British folklorist Walter Jekyll, and *Harlem Shadows*, the young poet traversed the linguistic, geographic and political divides that would later, as we have seen, delineate the boundaries of opposed critical camps in the McKay wars. While others have defined McKay's departure from Jamaica in terms of either agential self-assertion or cultural "imprisonment," however, I suggest that we are better served by an interpretive vocabulary that avoids this zero-sum binary. In adapting the vernacular political idiom of a peasantry undergoing a period of contraction and crisis, McKay's poems were always discordant political speech acts. Indeed, the term "peasant" is in this case something of a catachresis: Rather than transmuting a static peasant consciousness, McKay was compelled in his dialect poetry to contend with the intensifying (though never total) decomposition of the community of small freeholders that had, in the nineteenth century, formed in opposition to the colonial plantation system. While McKay's two Jamaican collections do seek, on one hand, to mythologize the virtues of the small peasant farmer, they at the same time articulate a transitional structure of class consciousness in which migration and wage-labor are understood as necessary strategies of communal adaptation.

A displaced form of this transitional consciousness reappears in *Harlem Shadows*, a collection that paradoxically adopts "peasant" lyric forms to chronicle the tumultuous historical formation of an urban Black proletariat. In following the evolution of McKay's poetics from rural Jamaica through the early Harlem Renaissance, the chapter thus also seeks to offer two

angles of vision onto a single overarching process of Caribbean peasant dispossession and diasporic class formation. "Conservative" and "radical" are only provisionally useful terms here, for they ignore the shifting historical terrain on which Caribbean oppositional consciousness was, in this period, being constituted. What David Scott says of Toussaint Louverture applies as well to Claude McKay and the masses he sought to represent: "the alternative modernity being made by Toussaint Louverture and his colleagues was not a prior choice they made as pre-constituted subjects waking up in the middle of a world they found objectionable and in need of change; it was a choice partly constituted by that modern world and, therefore, a choice partly constructed through its conceptual and ideological apparatuses."[38] McKay emerged as a poetic representative of the Black masses at a time when the meaning of self-determination was losing its self-evidence, when ideas of agency and freedom were subject to increasingly intense and bitter struggles. In the analysis that follows, no stable ground of agency will be located: Instead, I will aim to follow the wayward paths of McKay's vagabond poetics, in which the composition of revolutionary subjectivity can appear as the dispossession of a prior agency, and in which a renunciation of the political Will can express the desire for a different kind of freedom.

This chapter is comprised of three sections which trace the arc of McKay's career from Jamaica through the Harlem Renaissance. In the first section I explore the forces of peasant contraction and dispossession which, paradoxically, created the conditions in which McKay could appear as the poetic representative of the Jamaican peasantry. This section situates McKay's politico-poetic practice in relation to the rise of U.S. imperial agriculture, the expropriation of peasant lands, and the pressures of outmigration which all shape the struggles of the Jamaican peasantry in the early twentieth century. The second section turns to a close

[38] Scott, *Conscripts*, 115.

analysis of Mckay's Jamaican peasant poetics. I here engage with McKay's vernacular adaptation of Schopenhauerian pessimism, asking why McKay deploys Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy to express the "articulate consciousness" of the peasantry. I here trace the origins of a tension between pessimistic and exhortatory modes which persists well beyond McKay's emigration to the U.S. In the third and final section of the chapter I follow McKay's travels throughout the transatlantic Harlem Renaissance, exploring how the peasant poet adapts to a new stage of Caribbean diasporic class formation. I suggest that McKay's poetics undertakes a "creolization of forms" which attempts to translate between the discrepant Black diasporic class strata he identifies in *The Negroes in America*.

*The "Articulate Consciousness of the Peasantry"*

In the winter of 1911-1912 a series of McKay's poems appeared in Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner*. These poems mark a threshold in Caribbean literary history: Probably the first sustained use of creole dialect in the Jamaican press, they also introduced McKay to the world as a lyricist-cum-social commentator, a dual role that he'd experiment with and occasionally chafe against but never finally abandon throughout his career. The reclusive Jamaican folklorist Walter Jekyll had declared upon reading early drafts of McKay's dialect poems that they captured "the articulate consciousness of the peasants."[39] The poems that appeared in December 1911 and January 1912 issues of the *Gleaner* seek to deliver on this promise by recording for public edification the peasantry's views on what one speaker calls "the pressin' queshtons o' de day."[40] Indeed, poems like "Chrismas in De Air" and "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin'" constitute the

[39] McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, 16.

[40] McKay, "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin,'" in *Complete Poems*, 9.

*Gleaner*'s sole apparent effort to represent a "peasant" perspective on the regressive colonial tax policy that had been debated in the paper for several months. In "Peasants Ways O' Thinking," McKay seems acutely aware of the historical novelty of public-facing peasant speech: "A t'ink buccra ha' jawed enuff,/ Bout tekin' duty off foodstuff;/ An as 'tis said de good's fe we,/ Time's come for *our* talk 'bouten i."[41] These lines are remarkable, not only for their assertion of the imperative for Black self-representation in public sphere discourse, but for the how they subject that same discourse to a kind of vernacular minoritization. McKay uses patois dialect to grammatically destabilize his discursively empowered Black subject, chipping away at the public sphere's façade of universal linguistic transparency. A burst of singular and plural pronouns ("we," "our," "I") draws attention to the problem of naming—of nomination—as intrinsic to Black practices of collective self-representation. With this pronominal pluralization McKay subtly suggests, at the onset of his career, the simultaneously form-giving and fracturing capacities of a Black subaltern poetics: Rather than transmuting a unitary peasant consciousness, he suggests, these poems will evoke Black collectivity in protean, partial and unfinished form.

As a sociolinguistic event, the peasant's speech has a significance that exceeds the propositional content of public debate: McKay's poem marks the coalescence in language of a disfranchised Black majority as the potential constituents of a reordered Jamaican public. Yet this early periodical poetry also serves as a case study in the problem of "form-content schizophrenia" that Maxwell identifies as the common criticism of McKay scholars. For while they appear on one hand as "protest poems," critiques of socioeconomic injustice designed to influence public opinion in the direction of remedial action, the "articulate consciousness" they reflect is oddly out-of-joint with this putatively reformative function. In what will become a

[41] Ibid.

running trope of McKay's dialect poetry, the speakers of the periodical poems habitually renounce, minimize, or deflate the optimism for social transformation that their protests against state tax policy would seem otherwise to imply. The embittered speaker of "Christmas In De Air," after lamenting the grinding poverty of tax-burdened smallholders, concludes with a sigh of resignation: "But we'll batter on tell deat'/ Holding life in desp'rate fait'/For we're foolish 'nough to know;/ Life is but a poppy show;/ We feel glad de end is near,/Though dere's Christmas in de air."[42] Apparently relinquishing any hope of persuading the *Gleaner*'s audience in the direction tax reform, the peasant speaker submits to an irresistible tide of collective despair that overwhelms the immediatist rhetoric of policy-targeted complaint. "Peasants Ways O' Thinking" similarly concludes a litany of grievances against the colonial state with a pivot towards political quietism: "We may n't be rich like buccra folk;/ For us de white,/ For dem de yolk,/ Da's de way dat the egg divide,/An we content wi' de outside./ Havin' we owna mancha-root,/ Havin' we dandy Sunday suit,/ We'll happy wi' our modest lot/ An' won't grudge buccra wha' dem got./ A piece o lan' fe raise two goat,/ A little rum fe ease we t'roat,/ A little cot fe res' we head--/An' we're contented tell we dead."[43] Though less despairing than "Christmas in De Air," this speaker takes a similarly fatalistic attitude towards the island's hierarchical social arrangements. McKay seems once again to double back on the rallying cry of the previous stanzas, as if to rein in and circumscribe the poem's potentially subversive valences. The nascently oppositional tone gives way to a pastoral image of rural domesticity defined, above all, by its minimalism: A little rum, a little cot, a modest lot. The effect of this deflationary conclusion has been to frustrate critical taxonomies of McKay's political genres: How can

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[42] McKay, "Christmas in de Air," in *Complete Poems*, 8.

[43] McKay, "Peasants Ways O' Thinking," 14.

McKay finally concede "what the rest of the poem explicitly denies, namely that the poor peasant will then be stereotypically contented with his lot"?[44] How do we make sense of this retreat into accomodationism at the end of a poem that also anticipates McKay's later "anti-capitalist revolutionary socialist positions"?[45] Without discarding these questions, we might also, however, ask: What historical developments in Black culture and politics implicitly underwrite our critical confusion with this poem, making us respond to it at an almost visceral level as a political and aesthetic failure? If we assume that McKay, as the poem's title suggests, was endeavoring to represent a true and coherent portrait of peasants' "ways o' thinking," why does the poem appear to us now as an internally contradictory and indeed self-cancelling speech act? What, conversely, allowed McKay to take for granted as continuous and compatible forms of expression that later came to appear as anathema?

It is not particularly revealing to treat this dissonance between protest and accommodation as a matter of the author's own personal political affiliations; as we will see, this tension persists in McKay's writing even when he explicitly identified with the revolutionary tendencies of the New Negro movement. The discordant nature of McKay's political voice is better understood, then, not simply a product of individual indecisiveness, but rather as its own peculiar principle of politico-aesthetic unity. I want to suggest that McKay's vacillation between radicalism and quietism—which occurs not only once but in a recursive pattern across his career, and not only between but within individual poems—refracts a real crisis of collective agency

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[44] Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 51.

[45] James and McKay, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice*, 138.

rooted in the historical process of Caribbean class formation.[46] The canonical image of McKay as an empowering voice of New Negro radicalism has militated against sustained consideration of mass Black *dis*empowerment as an animating force within his poetry. Yet McKay's career begins in an historical conjuncture defined, not by a clear horizon of revolutionary expectation, but rather by the erosion and fragmentation of a repertoire of communal adaptive strategies cultivated in an earlier period of struggle.[47] Despite the self-consciously modernist, avant-garde and "progressive" cultural movements with which he is most closely associated, the advent of McKay as a poetic representative of the Black masses was in many ways a profoundly belated literary-historical event. McKay emerged onto the literary scene as new kind of poet –"a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood"[48] — at the same time that the community of peasant freeholders was undergoing a painful process of contraction and subordination to capitalist agriculture, portending the loss of the relative economic autonomy for which the previous generation had so forcefully struggled. McKay's career begins, in other words, with a radical subject not in formation but in dissolution. This is not to suggest that channels for action were unavailable, that McKay's historical conjuncture was defined entirely by the experience of political defeat, or that cynicism was somehow a necessary or pre-determined response to the challenges of the moment. However, I do want to argue against the notion that McKay's political ambivalence was simply a reflection of immaturity or lack of insight, and, by extension, that his radicalization was a process of individual enlightenment in which a pre-constituted locus of

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[46] As North observes, "The problem posed by McKay's dialect poetry, and, for that matter, by all of his poetry, is how to reconcile this nostalgic romanticism with the militant rejection of the romantic found in other poems." See North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 118.

[47] I adopt this idea of a transformation in the horizon of political expectation from David Scott, who adopts the term from Reinhart Koselleck. See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity,* Prologue and Chapter 1. See also Kosselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[48] See Walter Jekyll's Preface to *Songs of Jamaica* in *Complete Poems*, 285.

historical agency was progressively discovered or revealed. Rather than define moments of agential depletion and pessimistic withdrawal simply as the sign of naivete or external ideological manipulation, I argue that such moments themselves constitute complex and self-conscious responses to genuinely conflicting social forces.

McKay's dialect poetry, including the periodical poems quoted above, contain numerous allusions to the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings were widely translated and debated in English intellectual circles from the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries. McKay encountered Schopenhauer first in the library of his brother U. Theo, but absorbed his teachings primarily through the influence of Walter Jekyll, the eccentric white folklorist who also convinced McKay to write in patois dialect.[49] Jekyll, who one scholar describes as "a fin de siècle bohemian with agnostic leanings and an aristocratic background," was part of a cohort of "visionaries, social misfits, poets, and reformers" who flocked to Jamaica at the turn of the century.[50] As Josh Gosciak has shown, alienated members of the English aristocracy, such as Jekyll and the Fabian Socialist governor Lawrence Olivier, felt a responsibility to protect Jamaica from the disruptive forces of European industrial capitalism. Gosciak locates the basis for McKay and Jekyll's collaboration in the appearance of a shared class interest between a threatened colonial peasantry and an increasingly marginal English gentry: "Jekyll's rejection of Englishness might be founded upon this distaste, which he shared with McKay, for the modern middle class, whose material wealth and social standing rose in relation to the destruction of that very countryside, now in the colonies, of simple time-honored

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[49] See James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 65.

[50] Rhonda Cobham, "Jekyll and Claude: The Erotics of Patronage in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*,'" *Caribbean Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1992), 57. See Gosciak, *The Shadowed Country*, 46.

values. Such was the oppression and sense of injustice that united peasant and gentry."[51] Gosciak demonstrates that this shared aversion to the consolidating hegemony of the global bourgeoisie rendered McKay particularly susceptible to Jekyll's influence on matters of aesthetics, underwriting not only the poet's adoption of dialect but also his experiments with the pastoral, the English ballad, and horticulture. Gosciak ignores the dour specter of Schopenhauer in his account of Jekyll's literary and philosophical pedagogy, and this is perhaps understandable given the importance he ascribes to the latter's benignly reparative and even quasi-utopian impulses. Yet Jekyll, who translated and edited a volume entitled *The Wisdom of Schopenhauer as Revealed in Some of His Writings*, was also the product of what one scholar called "an epoch of real pessimism" in British intellectual culture.[52] McKay's dialect poetry represents, among many other things, an extension of this age of pessimism to the early twentieth century Caribbean scene. It is worth asking, moreover, whether McKay's vernacularization of Schopenhauer continues or complicates the cultural logic of the aristocratic-peasant alliance that Gosciak see governing the logic of colonial cultural exchange.

Despite Jekyll's pastoral conservationism, the plantation society of Jamaica was no isle of refuge from the disruptive forces of global capital. In idealizing the Jamaican peasantry as a quaint holdover from the pre-capitalist past, Jekyll and his cohort of romantic imperialists filtered their perception of the Caribbean through a unilinear temporal schema that itself reinstated the universal homogeneity of capital as a necessary telos of modernity.[53] They thus

[51] Ibid., 54.

[52] R. Goodale, "Schopenhauer and Pessimism in Nineteenth Century English Literature," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 47(1) (March 1932), 241.

[53] I adopt "romantic imperialists" from David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

obscured what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls a "unique historical record of peasantries emerging socially and physically after the penetration of a peripheral area by the West, an area in which no reference can be made to a past within the past—a sort of zero-degree peasant evolution within the sphere of Euro-American capitalism."[54] Indeed, blindness towards the historical co-evolution of Caribbean peasantries and Western capitalism prevented even the most well-intentioned of British social reformers from adequately assessing the challenges faced by Black cultivators in the early twentieth century.[55] While Caribbeanist scholars have engaged in protracted debates concerning the contours and implications of Caribbean peasant development, the studies I draw on here all affirm the need to, as Trouillot puts it, "explain the logic of the coexistence of peasantries and capitalism."[56] As Trouillot also notes, however, coexistence does not imply the absence of contradiction. Ken Post describes Jamaican economic development from emancipation through the 1938 labor rebellions as a "struggle between two articulated structures" of production. "In the first decades after emancipation," he observes, "primitive accumulation was hampered by the emergence of a form of production alternative to the capitalist one, which denied it cheap labor power."[57] This period saw the rise of a Black peasant society that could justifiably be considered "autonomous": By purchasing land *en masse*, freed people thwarted the imperial state's efforts to "refashion plantation Jamaica into an ideal-typical

[54]Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 21.

[55] Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 65–66.

[56] Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*, 15.

[57] Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 39.

society culled from liberal political-economic thought."[58] Freeholds grew dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century, so that by the 1890s peasant proprietors probably encompassed half the population of Jamaica. Black land acquisition thus precipitated what Thomas Holt describes as a "phenomenal shift from a society in which most of the working population was employed by sugar or coffee estates to one in which most were freehold proprietors."[59] Post notes that mid-nineteenth century peasants were in a relatively strong position relative to landlords since they owned their own plots of land but also, crucially, because they controlled their own exchange relationships through an extended network of female "higglers."[60] He thus suggests that, in this glimmering historic interlude autonomous peasant power, the Jamaican peasantry were "Marx's free proprietors, rather than the basic exploited class of a pre-capitalist mode of production." Importantly for my purposes, this period also gave rise to what scholars have described as a Jamaican peasant "moral economy," a value system that stressed the importance of familial land retention, mutual aid and labor-sharing, and relative autonomy from wage labor.[61] The midcentury zenith of peasant power thus ultimately fostered not only a direct material challenge to the plantocracy, but also cultural notions of collective agency, rooted in independent access to the means of production, whose legacy outlasted later historical developments.

McKay's peasantry, while they inherited this moral economy, did not enjoy the politico-economic autonomy of the nineteenth century community of free proprietors. The reorientation

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[58] Christopher Taylor, *Empire of Neglect: The West Indies in the Wake of British Liberalism*, Radical Américas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 87.

[59] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 146.

[60] Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 33.

[61] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 168.

of Jamaica's export economy around the fruit trade, which itself acted as a positive stimulus to peasant cultivation in the 1860s and '70s, eventually "undercut the economic independence that that -population had cherished."[62] The cultivation of bananas, which were themselves transplanted to the Caribbean by the Spanish in 1516, has historically been one of the key "articulatory structures" linking the development of Jamaican peasant production to the global market. It seems that in the early years of the fruit trade the shift toward banana export actually contributed to the expansion of peasant smallholders. In 1890, notes Post, peasants with less than twenty acres were producing thirty-nine percent of cash crops; holdings of less than 10 acres produced 80 percent of bananas exported to the U.S.[63] McKay celebrates the ingenuity of the smallholder banana producer in "King Banana," which counterposes the native agricultural and culinary traditions of Black cultivators against the rationalized production of the big fruit conglomerates: "Wha' lef' fe buccra teach again/ Dis time about plantation?/ Dere's not'in dat can beat de plain/ Good ole-time cultibation."[64] Here banana production appears as a source of local pride and even a potential path to economic sovereignty. Later, as a deracinated émigré wandering the streets of New York, McKay encounters the commoditized form of Caribbean fruit as a symbol of cultural dispossession. In "The Tropics in New York," McKay's alienated speaker sees "bananas ripe and green" through the window of a Harlem fruit vendor, repackaged for consumption in the northern metropolis. The poem represents a mournful response to "King Banana" from the other side of the commodity chain: Viewing his native crops as a consumer

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[62] Holt, 348.

[63] Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 39.

[64] McKay, "King Banana," in *Complete Poems*, 28.

rather than a producer, the speaker turns aside and weeps, overcome with longing for the "old familiar ways."[65]

The dual valences of the banana in McKay's corpus register the contradictory effects of the fruit trade on Jamaican economic development. Despite the celebration of native agricultural traditions in "King Banana," the Jamaican pivot to fruit export was propelled not by local farmers but by U.S. capitalists, most notably Lorenzo D. Baker, who eventually secured a "virtual monopoly" over the industry with the United Fruit Company.[66] Baker's fleet of steamships secured competitive advantage in the carrying trade, which, as Holt shows, ultimately allowed him to establish control over banana production as well. While he initially purchased from independent peasant cultivators, Baker was able to dictate the price to producers by controlling alternative sources of supply. In the 1880s, Baker began purchasing and redeveloping sugar properties into banana plantations, further improving his position vis-à-vis the small peasantry: "Under these conditions, deprived of autonomy in the production process and of the ability to bargain over prices, peasant producers were more like wage workers paid at a piece rate than independent contractors."[67] As land rental rates soared, many peasant producers were forced to become tenants to Baker and other estate owners. Holt thus suggests that by the early twentieth century the formerly independent cultivators had become a "virtual proletariat."[68] It is equally important, however, to acknowledge the uneven consequences of the fruit trade. Rather than causing a uniform process of proletarianization, competition for the international market

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[65] McKay, "The Tropics in New York," in *CP,* 154.

[66] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 350.

[67] Holt, 355.

[68] Ibid., 356

also spurred the formation of “rich” and “middle” peasant classes, some of whom ultimately broke from the tradition of family production by employing dispossessed cultivators as wage laborers. The fruit trade did not precipitate an immediate transition from a “peasant” to a “capitalist” period of Jamaican development so much as it yielded new hybrid forms of economic activity, at once combining and heightening the conflict between the opposed forms of production. As Post observes, poor and middle peasants “continued to exist and even to increase in numbers after the turn of the century, and their forms of production continued to be largely non-capitalist.” However, “the increasingly important marketing of peasant produce for export was in capitalist hands”:

> Thus Jamaican agriculture was dominated by capitalist relations at the higher levels of production and in the export-import mode of exchange, but it was uneven structure, still in the twentieth century based upon two unevenly developed and combined structures of production, rather than one, with those in antagonistic contradiction.[69]

Rather than vanquishing the peasantry once and for all, then, Jamaica’s trajectory “gradually shifted its direction from the non-capitalist destination.”[70] If the peasant and capitalist modes of production had distinct historical origins, “by the late nineteenth century they were mutually recreating one another.”[71] Unlike McKay’s nostalgic British contemporaries, then, Post characterizes the turn-of-the-century Jamaican conjuncture in terms a conflictual inter-penetration of peasant and capitalist sectors.

To be sure, the shifting balance of power profoundly imperiled the Jamaican peasantry: The 1890s saw the beginning of a period of contraction, compounded by political powerlessness

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[69] Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*, 39.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

and regressive state tax policy, from which the small cultivators would never recover.[72] Yet it is only by insisting on the gradualness and unevenness of the process of peasant contraction that certain historical paradoxes become intelligible. Indeed, the increasingly visible prominence of Black cultivators in the Jamaican economy led colonial administrators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to revise aspects of the racist anti-peasant ideology that had dictated state policy in the post-emancipation period. Even James Anthony Froude's virulently racist travelogue expressed tentative support for peasant economic activity in the West Indies before cautioning that "the ownership of freeholds is one thing, and political power is another."[73] Official state discourse tilted towards positive assessments of peasant ingenuity at the same, and in some ways precisely because the balance of power had shifted towards capital. After all, the banana boom seemed to augur a new path to economic recovery in the wake of sugar's decline. Yet paternalistic reappraisals of the peasantry as the backbone of the Jamaican economy coincided with continued political disfranchisement. "The government had changed its attitude toward Afro-Jamaican peasants, but not it abhorrence of Afro-Jamaican political power," notes Holt. "Yet, ultimately, the fate of the peasantry depended on state power."[74] Post is blunter in his assessment: "The fact is that the colonial government was always unwilling or unable to do more than toy with the problem."[75] To foster the peasantry would have required aggressive land redistribution policies to counter the increasingly unequal conditions of market competition. Yet

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[72] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 10.

[73] James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1888), 88. For a discussion of the shifting attitudes of colonial administrators towards the peasantry see Holt, *The Problem of Freedom* 314-342.

[74] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom,* 317.

[75] Post, *Arise*, 66.

disproportionate representation of capitalist interests in the colonial power bloc "made it possible for a series of Governors from the late 1870s onwards to fall into the contradictory posture of on the one hand repossessing peasants' land, and on the other recognizing some of their problems and seeking to do something about them."[76] This contradictory stance was maintained by the Fabian Socialist governor Sydney Olivier who, despite his reputation as a reformer, failed to mount any robust challenge to private capital ("despite—or perhaps because of—his Fabianism," quips Post.) His own Morrisonian idealization of "pre-industrial" peasant society notwithstanding, Olivier's 1907-1913 tenure did little to reverse the process of peasant disempowerment. Indeed, it was precisely within the context of peasant subordination to capital that British pastoralism revealed both its usefulness and its bankruptcy. By idealizing the Jamaican peasantry as a pre-capitalist atavism, colonial administrators were able to simultaneously justify the policy of "beneficent despotism" and rhetorically valorize the island's primary producers. The pastoral mindset allowed administrators like Olivier, who celebrated Claude McKay and even received a dedicatory frontispiece in the poet's first collection, to embrace the peasantry as idyllic figures of rural virtue, but also left them ill-equipped to mount any serious campaign on their behalf. These contradictions reach a kind of apotheosis in the career of McKay, who earned an unprecedented degree of cultural recognition for the peasantry just as the material foundations of peasant society were being cut from beneath their feat.[77]

In fact, the same forces that threatened the Jamaican peasantry provided the conditions of possibility for McKay's anointment as their poetic representative. Claude McKay was born in

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[76] Ibid., 65-66.

[77] I here disagree with Gosciak's more generous assessment of Olivier, though I also draw on his account. See Gosciak, *The Shadowed Country*, 25-45.

1889 in the parish of Clarendon, the last of the eleven children of Hannah and Thomas McKay. Of all the McKay children Claude was, as William Maxwell aptly puts is, “the one most accustomed to the advantages of his father’s climb from day laborer to affluent commercial farmer.”[78] After inheriting a small plot of land from Hannah’s father in 1870, the McKays steadily expanded their property, ultimately accumulating more than one hundred acres of land, in addition to drays, livestock and a sugar mill, by the time of Claude’s departure for the U.S.[79] These relatively extensive property holdings granted T. McKay the right to vote in the island’s electoral system and established his position as a “village leader” in Sunny Ville. Distinguishing themselves from neighboring subsistence farmers, T. McKay produced staples such as coffee, bananas, and sugar both for local markets and for export.[80] Indeed, as Winston James suggests, the expansion of the McKays’ landholdings around the turn of the century was directly contingent upon the losses of the surrounding peasants. The shifting patterns of Jamaican land transactions in the 1890s mark the decade as a threshold in the island’s general pivot away from the “non-capitalist destination” of peasant agricultural development.[81] Woodville Marshall describes the period as one of “saturation” in which the peasantry stopped expanding holdings and began to undergo contraction.[82] Veront Satchell shows that peasant land purchases from planters slowed to a halt in the 1890s, marking the beginning of the decline of the vibrant

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[78] Maxwell, Intro to *CP*, xiii.

[79] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 18.

[80] Cooper, *Claude Mckay*, 8.

[81] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 10-11.

[82] Woodville Marshall, “Notes on Peasant Development in the West Indies since 1838,” *Social and Economic Studies*, 17.3 (September 1968): 252-63.

community of independent smallholders that had formed in the earlier period.[83] The pattern of transactions suggests a reversal in the direction of land redistribution back from small peasants and towards agrarian capitalists investing in the growing fruit trade. "During the final decade of the century," notes Holt, "small landholders were purchasing *from* each other and selling *to* merchants and institutions, often under pressure of defaulted mortgages and public seizures."[84] While the McKays came out of the small peasantry, the expansion of their property was directly implicated in the larger process of land concentration. From 1869 to 1900, the state repossessed six thousand acres of land from "peasant squatters" in the McKays' Clarendon parish alone. Clarendon had the largest area of land repossessed, accounting for more than a third of the island's total, and also the largest number of peasant squatters ejected.[85] James concludes that "Clarendon was perhaps the most favorable area in Jamaica for one in Thomas McKay's position and with his ambition: bargains were to be had if one got to the encumbered peasants a step ahead of the bailiff."[86] Indeed, Claude McKay himself testifies that his father benefitted directly from the increasingly unequal land market: "He was always ready to snap up a piece of land that was for sale through the death of its owner or its being encumbered by taxes."[87]

In drawing out the McKays' structural position as beneficiaries of peasant dispossession, I do not mean to advance some kind of moralistic critique of false consciousness. My aim is not in other words to simply prove, as other scholars have suggested, that the McKays were in fact

[83] Veront Satchell, *From Plots to Plantations: Land Transactions in Jamaica, 1866-1900,* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1990.)

[84] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 339.

[85] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 11.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

not peasants:[88] Instead, I assume that this social category is itself in flux, acquiring discrepant and contradictory meanings throughout the period in question (and indeed across Mckay's career). What I want to emphasize, instead, is how the McKay family's evolving economic and social position registers the internal differentiation of the peasantry in the age of ascendant agricultural capitalism. This requires some careful thinking about the role of the McKay household as a moral-political entity, as well as unit of economic production, within the town of Sunny Ville. McKay remembered his father as a "patriarch of the mountain country" and "something of a village leader, as they have in Africa."[89] According to McKay's biographer Wayne Cooper, T. McKay "often judged the petty disputes brought to him by neighbors, who preferred such informal proceedings to the more distance and expensive processes of the colonial legal system."[90] Cooper suggests that T. McKay's position as unofficial legislator and moral authority helped to "maintain the community existence" of the area's peasantry, building on the traditions of local political autonomy and "mutual aid" that had developed out of the earlier efforts to minimize dependency on the plantations.[91] McKay pays tribute to the peasant "mutual aid" tradition of labor-sharing in his autobiography *My Green Hills of Jamaica*: "When planting time come around, a peasant who has a large lot of land will be helped by other peasants especially in clearing the soil…It was a kind of community work. Today one peasant was helped by the other peasants and the next day it was another peasant. So it went round and round until

[88] Maxwell, Introduction to *CP*, xiii. James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 11.

[89] Claude McKay, *My Green Hills of Jamaica.* (University of Exeter Press, 1997), 60.

[90] Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 8.

[91] Ibid.

every peasant had had his land cleared and planted."[92] In acquiring and concentrating under his own ownership parcels of land whose market value had become cost prohibitive for small proprietors, T. McKay, on one hand, contributed to the erosion of the material basis for this "community work," which is after all premised on a "community" of smallholders. Yet T. McKay's purchasing of land otherwise destined for repossession by the state can also be interpreted as an extension of his responsibilities as a "patriarch" invested in maintaining the social fabric of the rural Black community. The expansion of the McKays' landholdings can thus be justified in terms continuous with the "moral economy" of the nineteenth-century peasantry. We might indeed ask whether the economic behavior of the McKays was itself germinated in what Wynter calls the culture of the "plot."[93] The moral and political importance conferred on land ownership in the Black Jamaican community after all traces back to the earlier small peasants' efforts to secure an integral community beyond the control of the plantation. T. McKay, who grew bananas for export, might similarly be conceived as a leader in the effort to secure Black economic autonomy from U.S. fruit monopoly. Claude's recollections of the McKay family farm suggest a blurring between the moral economy of the endangered community of smallholders with material interests of the petty bourgeoisie. In *My Green Hills McKay* refers to "our peasants," an ambiguously possessive phrasing which could point either to a sense of collective identity or to an employer-employee relation.[94] While cultivation was a family operation, T. McKay also hired outside labor ("Of course at harvest time we have many

[92] McKay, *My Green Hills*, 29.

[93] Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation."

[94] McKay, *My Green Hills*, 29.

extra cutters," McKay recalls).[95] Does bringing in outside workers to help cut cane constitute "mutual aid"? The McKay household economy combined features of the "inalienable corporate estate" that maintains the continuity and identity of the family line with the embryonic structure of a capitalist farm.[96] Translated into Ken Post's typology of the Jamaican intermediate classes, T. McKay's occasional employment of wage labor places him on the border between the petty bourgeoisie and "small capitalism." The consciousness of the McKays was "determined by its combination of the ownership and control of property…with the need of its members to take part in manual labor themselves."[97] To the extent that he retained responsibilities as a worker for the family operation, Claude McKay can be said to have "carried the contradiction" of this class within himself.

In following this detour through the historiography of the Jamaican peasantry, I hope to have clarified the weight and severity of the historical paradoxes that impinge upon McKay's early efforts to represent the "articulate consciousness of the peasantry." I suggested above that McKay can be viewed, from a certain historical vantage point, as a "belated" literary figure. It is indeed only by attending to this belatedness that we can draw out the implications of what critics have variously described as McKay's political ambivalence, his lack of commitment, or his vacillation between protest and accommodation. What I mean to indicate by "belatedness" is not simply some minor historical disjuncture, however, but instead the paradoxical superimposition of radical literary novelty against a backdrop of palpable historical decline. In McKay's poetry, one might say, the peasant appears simultaneously as a subject whose time has come (Time's

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[95] Ibid., 24.

[96] Jean Besson, "Family Land as a Model for Martha Brae's New History: Culture Building in an Afro-Caribbean Village," in *Afro-Caribbean Villages in Historical Perspective*, ed. Charles V. Carnegie (Kingston: African-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, 1987), 100-132.

[97] Post, *Arise*, 104-107.

come for our talk 'bouten i.") and one whom time is passing by. This contradiction is itself, as we have seen, rooted in what Post calls the "struggle between two articulated structures" of Jamaican production: The expansion of the fruit trade allowed the Jamaican peasant to appear suddenly *valorizable*, both by capital and by the colonial state; yet the repositioning of the peasant in circuits of economic and discursive valorization itself eroded the historical foundations of peasant autonomy. The historical peak of peasant power was by definition a deviation from the script of colonial economic development. In securing freeholds and minimizing their dependence on the plantations, freed people had practiced a form of collective self-determination anathema to the ideology of the imperial state and the forms of freedom (i.e, "free" wage labor) it prescribed. Now, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the peasantry found a public cultural representative at the very moment that the material foundations of their autonomy were imperiled as never before. As much as they mark a watershed of Black literary modernity, then, there is also a palpable sense of melancholy, and even tragedy, that looms across McKay's dialect poems. It wasn't that new avenues of struggle, or even emancipatory possibilities, were simply unavailable: However, the turn away from the "noncapitalist destination" of Jamaican economic development "transformed the conceptual and ideological conditions in which willing subjectivity was constituted."[98] The question of "what is to be done?" was, for McKay's precarious community of smallholders, itself profoundly painful, for it forced a confrontation with a new set of politico-economic constraints that shifted the very terms of collective survival. It is within the tragic double-bind of the "two articulated structures" of production, then, that we must situate McKay's complex poetic meditations on the problem of peasant agency.

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[98] Scott, *Conscripts*, 122.

*Pessimism of the Will*

"Contentment with one's lot" is one of the dominant tropes of McKay's dialect poetry, and a frequent source of frustration for those hoping to locate early signs of political radicalism in his representations of the peasantry. This morally charged notion of humble equanimity, even and especially in the face of mounting social crisis, constitutes what Fredric Jameson might call one of the grounding "ideologemes," or units of class discourse, within McKay's articulation of peasant consciousness.[99] It appears, as we have seen, at the end of "Peasants' Ways O' Thinking," when the speaker declares "We'll happy wi' our modest lot/ An' won't grudge buccra wha' dem got."[100] Sometimes McKay expresses the same idea in a retrospective mode, counterposing a lost condition of rural contentment against a disconsolate present. The speaker of "A Dream" employs the trope while recalling an idyllic boyhood in a remote rural village: "I'm happy as the swee-swees on the wing,/ And feel naught but contentment in my lot."[101] Later, in "If We Must Die," the figure of the "accursed lot" signifies precisely what is unacceptable about the speaker's situation. Yet even here, "the lot" refers to historical necessity, to a given set of circumstances that constrain and condition available options for agential self-assertion—the exigency in this case being that "we must die."[102] The Oxford English Dictionary entry for "lot" reveals sedimented histories of property ownership and economic distribution bleeding into generalized notions of human fatality. "Lot" has by turns referred to "an object

[99] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 76.

[100] McKay, "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin,'" *CP,* 12.

[101] McKay, "A Dream," *CP,* 64.

[102] McKay, "If We Must Die," *CP,* 177.

used in methods of random selection" (i.e., the "drawing of lots"); "A portion or share of property, goods, etc., esp. as part of an inheritance."; "An allowance of corn paid as part of a fee to a thresher"; "A tax, a duty"; "A plot of land"; and, "A person's destiny, fortune, or situation in life (originally viewed as having been allotted by fate or divine providence)."[103] This small selection from a long list of historical referents already indicates how "lot" has functioned to transform quantity into quality, infusing definite "portions" or "shares" of material goods with moral and religious meaning. "Lot" remediates human economy through divine order, making what is counted appear unaccountable, transforming what is given into what is fated. Its political inflection, then, is generally conservative, as it is used to naturalize socially produced hierarchies and economic inequalities. Yet the heterogeneous forms of property and value encompassed under "lot" belie the sense of immutability the term has often been used to convey.

I take the recurring theme of contentment with one's lot as emblematic of McKay's general concern with the proscription and delimitation of human agency in the Jamaican peasantry's "moral economy." McKay scholars have been understandably averse to this notion of the lot and the work of political pacification it seems to perform. The trope of Black contentment is, after all, hard to disentangle from racist traditions of minstrelsy and white plantation apologetics. One of the important achievements of Caribbean literary criticism, indeed, has been to transform the image of the peasant from a figure of humble acquiescence into one of "cultural guerilla resistance."[104] However, to ignore the regulative ideal of the "lot" in favor of romantic-heroic accounts of peasant agency (to, as we might put it, excise the "lot" from

[103] "lot, n.". OED Online. September 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/110425?rskey=abj5GP&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed October 20, 2021).

[104] Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation."

the "plot") risks occluding the distinctive moral discourses of agency and fatality that have underwritten Caribbean peasantries' strategies of socioeconomic adaptation.[105] Rather than reproducing the minstrel tradition's conflation of contentment and intellectual inferiority, we might ask what the communal moral injunction to adjust one's expectations to a given set of circumstances seeks to positively uphold. In "Out of Debt," a poem from *Songs of Jamaica*, contentment appears as a strategy for affectively managing household budget austerity. A peasant family has reduced expenditure during Christmas in order to pay off debt owed to the local shopkeeper. The speaker's amiable ode to a meagre but debt-free Christmas season serves to emblematize an ethic of thrift that prioritizes the overall financial security of the family household over the immediate gratification of one's appetite: "De Christmas is finish'; It was rather skinnish,/Yet still we are happy, an' so needn' fret,/ For dinner is cookin',/ An' baby is lookin'/An' laughin'; she knows dat her pa owe no debt."[106] Despite the "skinnish" holiday meal, the family rejoices that accounts have been settled with "shopkeeper Marter," taking comfort in the knowledge that their frugality during the Christmas season will keep the bailiff away from their front door. Yet these cost-saving measures can hardly be reduced to the prioritization of "needs" over "wants": While giving up "wine fe breakfas'" might seem benign enough a sacrifice, it is harder to take at face value lines such as "We all is contented fe suck one dry bone."[107] It isn't merely renunciation of holiday excess, then, but a more drastic reduction of caloric intake that McKay advertises as proof of peasant self-discipline. This undoubtedly shifts the tone of the poem, darkening the atmosphere of holiday cheer. It wouldn't be quite right to say

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[105] I here draw on Scott's critical account of the romantic mode of historical emplotment, and also follow his efforts to move beyond the constraints of this mode. See Scott, *Conscripts*, 58-97.

[106] McKay, "Out of Debt," *CP*, 33.

[107] Ibid.

that McKay "ironizes" or satirizes the stereotype of peasant contentment, however, for this would undermine the earnest tribute he wants to pay to the peasant moral economy of thrift.[108] Contentment is not being represented here as an ideological blinder, but it also isn't being naively deployed to obfuscate suffering. The poem instead reveals contentment as a conscious strategy for managing the terms of social reproduction under a given set of constraints. McKay is, in other words, exploring how the moral prescription of contentment allows a peasant family to pursue a particular ideal of economic autonomy (in this case, freedom from debt) through forms of willed self-regulation which themselves also index profound economic non-sovereignty.

Like "Peasants Ways O' Thinking" and "Christmas in De Air," "Out of Debt" exposes the dire economic straits of the peasantry while resisting the affective and rhetorical structure of "protest." Such representations of suffering but non-protesting subjects can be disquieting for the reader, for while such representations seem on one hand designed to incite a desire for some process of amelioration or reform, they also strive to obviate this reformative impulse by asserting the self-sufficiency of peasants' own strategies for economically and affectively managing crisis. To be sure, the strategies of self-imposed austerity that appear in these poems and the normative moral injunctions that accompany them--"Making do with what one has," "putting one's faith in God," etc.—might look like effective ideological tools for blunting political resistance and legitimating an unjust social order. But the moral economy of contentment can also be described as a modality of "resistance" insofar as it defends the peasant community against affective restructuring by immiseration. Throughout the Jamaican poems,

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[108] I here disagree with critics like North and Cooper who deal with the discordance between suffering and contentment by attributing the latter to an ironic or satirical performance. See North, *Dialect of Modernism*, 117 and Cooper, *Claude McKay* 51.

McKay maintains a precarious balance between conflicting imperatives to, on one hand, expose the depredations to which the peasantry are increasingly subjected and, on the other, celebrate the forms of communal self-valorization and pride that continue to provide relief from economic attrition and struggle. Of course, the degree to which a moral discourse of contentment can function as an effective buttress against immiseration depends on the availability of resources and material infrastructures of survival: One can't be contended with one's lot if there's no lot to be contended with. Contentment is not an inexhaustible resource, then, but neither does it provide a quantifiable metric of suffering that rises and falls in direct proportion with one's objective material wellbeing. Indeed, McKay's peasants tend to assert the moral imperative of contentment precisely when they are reduced to the barest minimum of life support systems. The Jamaican poems in this way become experiments with tonal ambivalence and emotional indirection, as the regimes of affective management they espouse run increasingly counter to the forms of everyday attrition they also depict. It is as though McKay is seeking to determine the threshold of suffering at which the apparently minimalist ideal of "contentment" would itself appear as a heroic political achievement, mutating from a policy of passive acquiescence into the most strenuous act of willful self-exertion.

This admixture of emotional extremes is evident in "Whe' fe Do," a poem which elevates a world-weary expression of resignation into a kind credo of peasant resilience. Each stanza closes with a variation of the titular mantra, transforming the speaker's ordinary political cynicism into a principle of formal repetition. The defeatist and deflationary tone of "Whe' fe Do" seems far removed from the exhortatory rhetoric of the anthems that will later propel the postwar movements of New Negro resistance. Yet McKay's variations of the refrain "whe' fe do" subtly complicate the poem's message of overwhelming fatalism. When the moral injunction

to contentment arrives, McKay's tense also shifts to the subjunctive: "We needn' fold we han' an cry,/ Nor vex we heart wid groan and sigh;/ De best we can do is fe try/ To fight de despair dawin' nigh:/ Den we might conquer by an' by--/Dat we might do."[109] Here McKay finally provides an answer, albeit a distinctly unheroic one, to the rhetorical question posed in the refrain: What we can do, the speaker suggests, is manage our collective affective response to the crisis by renouncing "despair." Despite its fatalism, then, "Whe fe' Do" also offers a kind of exhortation:

We've got to wuk wid might an' main,
To use we han' an' use we brain,
To toil an' worry, 'cheme an' train/ Fe t'ings that bring more loss dan gain
To stan' de sun an' bear de rain,
An' suck we bellyful o' pain/ Widouten cry nor yet complain—
For dat caan' do

And though de wul' is full o' wrong,
Dat caan' prevent we sing we song
All de day as we wuk along—
Whe else fe do?[110]

What makes these stanzas emblematic—not only of the Jamaican poems, but of McKay's entire corpus—is the peculiar way in which they attempt to correlate the moral economy of contentment with the declining fortunes of the Jamaican peasantry. McKay's speaker somewhat jarringly undercuts what at first appears as a generic rhetorical strategy of uplift by admitting that all the peasants' mental and physical labor will ultimately "bring more loss den gain." But what does it mean to knowingly exhort the peasantry to operate at a perpetual and compounding loss? Rather than espouse a strivers' ethic of success in which an attitudinal shift can directly affect a positive change in one's material circumstances, McKay seems to embrace the tonal dissonance

[109] McKay, "Whe' fe Do," *CP*, 26.

[110] Ibid., 26-27.

between his affective and economic prescriptions. It is useful here to recall, by way of contrast, McKay's later account of Dunbar as a poet "in harmony with the life of the Negro workers of his period." In *The Negroes in America*, McKay suggests that the levity of Dunbar's poetry mirrors the objective circumstances of the post-emancipation African American working classes. Dunbar's poems, which "are full of optimism and contain more joyful notes than the plantation melodies of the slaves," thereby represent "the very soul of the Negro during the period of emancipation" and directly thereafter.[111] In poems such as "Whe fe do," however, McKay seems to explore the possibility that these "joyful notes," even while they retain an important place in rural Black expressive repertoires, no longer accurately reflect Black peasants' own assessments of their political-economic prospects. If the moral economy of contentment appears increasingly as a regime of austerity and self-renunciation, this is because contentment must now be prescribed *in spite of*, rather than growing organically out of, the peasantry's objective material circumstances. This prescription has not, it must be emphasized, been simply evacuated of any cultural or political efficacy; its distinctive value, however, now resides precisely in its articulation of a growing discrepancy between the moral-affective and the real economy. Even as it sometimes presents itself as a form of commonsense economic pragmatism (dovetailing with virtues like "thrift"), the moral economy of contentment also tends to overflow the bounds of its own supposed politico-economic rationality, appearing as a supremely *anti*economic value system. Something more vexed and contradictory is at stake in this moral economy, then, than mere submission to oppression. Through his representations of suffering but non-protesting subjects, McKay seems on one hand to renounce any hope for a structural political transformation that would materially improve Black peasantry's chances for survival. Yet these

[111] McKay, *The Negroes in America*, 69.

poems of peasantry in crisis also represent an early formulation of a political and moral question that will preoccupy McKay across his career, appearing later in the novel *Banjo* in the form of the proposition that "if the Negro had to be defined, there was every reason to define him as a challenge rather than a 'problem' to Western civilization."[112] To conceive of the Negro as a "challenge," as McKay outlines it in the novel, represents a break from the forms of sociological reason that analyze modern Black subjectivity as merely a mechanical symptom of the ills of capitalist civilization. The antieconomic prescription of contentment with "things that bring more loss than gain" is a strategy of adjustment to crisis; it also represents an insistence on the possibility of a Black consciousness that resists determination by what some might call objective "class interests." The moral economy of contentment thus also foreshadows McKay's ambivalent relation to the forms of class consciousness prescribed by the proletarian arts movement.

When McKay's peasants do protest, they do so ambivalently: With doubt that their complaints will be heard, and with hopes that their own autonomous economic infrastructures will provide sufficient conditions for social continuity. This ambivalence is especially pronounced in poems that directly address the transformations taking place in the early twentieth century peasant labor process. McKay's smallholder speakers frequently complain, for example, about the low prices they are forced to charge for the cash crops they produce. This grievance reflects the loss of control over exchange relationships that, as Post suggests, facilitates the uneven integration of peasant labor into commodity production for larger markets. In "Quashie to Buccra," the opening poem of *Songs of Jamaica*, McKay takes deliberate aim at the racist Carlylean stereotype of peasant laziness, suggesting that this trope has itself become an instrument for the exploitation of peasant labor. If "Quashie to Bucrra" is among the more

[112] McKay, *Banjo*, 273.

“radical” of McKay’s dialect poems, its confrontational tone arises from a context of market transaction in which the hypostasized “buccra” is already a consumer of peasant produce. The smallholder’s critique of the so-called “Quashee syndrome” –the idea that peasants are endowed with simple aspirations, and work just enough to immediately gratify their desires, etc.—is occasioned by his effort to reassert control over the price of his “petaters”:[113] “You tas’e petater an’ you say it sweet,/ But you no know how hard we wuk fe it;/ You want a basketful fe quattiewut,/ ‘Cause you no know how ‘tiff de bush fe cut.”[114] The peasant speaker proceeds to catalog the labors of potato cultivation, from the clearing of bushes (“de shamar lyin’ t’ick like pumpkin soup”) to the digging of banks (often threatened, he notes, “by we naybor pig”) and the final harvest. This account of smallholder production serves as a polemical counter to the buccra consumer’s self-serving presumption that peasant cultivators are merely passive stewards of a bountiful and self-regenerating nature. The poem is counter-pastoral, then, insofar as it seeks to supplant an outsider’s fantasy of rural leisure with a realist portrait of the working countryside. McKay’s strategy of demystification hinges on the assertion that the buccra’s idealized landscape has itself been produced as a politico-economic necessity: “De fiel’ pretty? It couldn’t be less ‘an dat,/ We wuk de bes’, an’ den de lan’ is fat; We dig de row dem eben in a line,/ An’ keep it clean—den so it mus’ look fine.”[115] Peasants, in other words, are not brushstrokes on a landscape painting, but workers; the myth of peasant carelessness, if it was once employed by colonial administrators to explain the freed peoples’ refusal of wage labor, is used now to drive down the value of their product.

[113] For a discussion of the racist idea of the “Quashee syndrome” see Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 146.

[114] McKay, “Quashie to Buccra,” *CP*, 19.

[115] Ibid.

Yet even in a poem committed, for explicit pragmatic purposes, to demonstrating the hardship of the peasant labor process, McKay closes with an earnest tribute to the ideal of peasant contentment. The final stanza begins by repeating the poem's first two lines, recalling the contentious scene of bargaining that set the stage for the speaker's narrative of potato cultivation. Rather than reproducing the first stanza in full, however, McKay alters the final two lines. The closing variation of the opening stanza, if it doesn't quite reconcile the structuring antagonism of the speaker's polemic, certainly tempers its dominant confrontational tone: "You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet,/ But you no know how hard we wuk fe it;/ Yet still de hardship melt away/ Wheneber it come roun' to reapin' day."[116] While retaining the driving motive to revise white mystifications of peasant labor, the closing two lines work to diffuse, even to the point of potentially undermining, the central premise underwriting the speaker's argument against the Quashee stereotype—namely, the idea that potato cultivation is hard work. The speaker here is not so much revising his own critique of buccra ideology, however, as he is minimizing that ideology's importance: In noting, almost as a kind of playful aside, that the hardship of cultivation does in fact "melt away" on "reapin' day," the speaker is in effect gently tugging the rug out from under the idea that the peasants' pleasure and fulfillment depends on recognition from the buccras who consume their products.[117] Importantly, this tonal shift also takes us to a different stage of the production process. If the opening stanza's complaint is framed by a market scene of price negotiation ("You want a basketful fe quattiewut") the closing stanza's diffusion of that complaint centers on the harvest, the "reapin'" that occurs prior to sale.

[116] Ibid., 19-20.

[117] I here disagree strongly with North's reading of the final line as reversion to "happy-go-lucky" stereotype. See North, *Dialect of Modernism,* 117.

With this pivot to "reapin' day" the speaker evokes an agricultural cycle whose temporal rhythm and social significance exceeds the market transaction that has occasioned his vindicationist account of potato cultivation as "hard wuk."[118] The poem doesn't explain exactly why hardship melts away on reapin' day, and that, perhaps, is part of the point—this expression of contentment marks the limit of what needs to be explained to the buccra consumer at all, it deflates and relativizes the utility of the rhetorical performance in which the value of the potato is contingent upon the revelation of the difficulty of peasant labor. It may be that there are other buyers willing to pay more than the buccra's quattiewut; it may be that the potatoes are also grown for peasants' self-consumption and thus retain their status as use-values unmediated by the market. What matters is that, in this case, contentment is a sign not of weakness but of relative strength. According to the smallholder's moral economy, potato cultivation functions, at least partially, as its "own reward"; on reaping day, the peasants discover the product of their labor, not simply as a commodity to be sold at the buccra's preferred price, but as a direct recompense for the hard work they have expended. The tension between protest and contentment in this poem in other words reflects a politico-economic conjuncture in which peasant labor is increasingly organized around production for external markets but also resists subsumption by market relations, i.e., is not itself a commodity. The work is hard and the erasure of that hard work must be protested, but compensation for the peasant's labor is not dependent upon this protest because the social value of potato cultivation is not encompassed by the quattiewut the buccra wants to pay for it.

The tension between protest and contentment throughout McKay's Jamaican poems can therefore not be assimilated into a static binary of "resistance" and "quietism." The discordance

[118] For a critical account of Black vindicationist discourse see Scott, *Conscripts*, 83: "Vindicationism is therefore at once a practice of providing evidence to refute a disagreeable or incorrect claim and a practice of *reclamation*, and indeed, of *redemption* of what has been denied."

between these rhetorical modes instead registers a slow but palpable shift in the terrain of struggle itself. The moral economy of contentment provides a kind of regulatory system for managing the transformations of the early twentieth century, allowing the peasantry to negotiate the terms of social continuity within the shifting trajectory of Jamaican economic development. Often in McKay's poems contentment serves a compensatory function, offsetting economic costs and losses at various scales by assigning primary social value to the land, social relationships, and cultural traditions that endure within the peasant community. As the economic fortunes of the peasantry are increasingly intertwined with the colonial state economy, however, the affirmation that contentment offers looks increasingly like a double-edged sword, as it risks providing ideological cover for status quo power arrangements that themselves pose an increasing threat to the material foundations of peasant society. Nonetheless, the poems I've surveyed thus far also shed light on the forms of politico-economic and cognitive adaptation that inhibit a unilinear process of peasant radicalization or transition from "contentment" to struggle. To engage in political struggle is, at an affective level, to allow one's *dis*contentment to become the foundation for one's action in the world. Defined in this way, struggle itself appears more as a process of negotiation with one's non-sovereignty than as the discovery of one's power. For peasant cultivators in early twentieth century Jamaica, to allow discontentment to become a primary motivator of action was, according to the speaker of "Whe fe do," to risk "despair." The smallholders' assertion that "De best we can do is fe try/ To fight de despair dawin' nigh" warns against the reconstitution of peasant consciousness on the basis of discontentment, arguing in effect that such subjective reorientation would only expedite rather than impede the process of decline.[119] The moral prescription of contentment refocuses collective attention from what is

[119] McKay, "Whe' fe Do," CP, 26.

being lost to what endures, forming an affective bulwark against the processes of peasant contraction and disempowerment. Contentment thus appears in McKay's poems, not as some simple reflex of minstrel ideology, but as the moral linchpin of a peasantry in crisis.

There are, of course, good reasons for early twentieth century Jamaican smallholders to doubt the political efficacy of protest. The systematic exclusion of the peasantry from representation in the colonial government, as Holt notes, meant that the peasantry tended to direct their politics into nonelectoral channels. By the late nineteenth century, the colonial office proved indifferent and even hostile to peasants' protests, which usually focused on land taxes.[120] I want to suggest, however, that McKay's account of peasant cynicism cannot be reduced to a reflex of political exclusion. The fundamental conflict arises not from the mere absence of political representation, but from the question of what exactly is to be represented. Ken Post's analysis is, once again, clarifying: "In order to survive and expand, the poor, middle and rich peasants had to compete in the production of crops for the world market with both non-Jamaican producers and with Jamaican capitalist farmers. To do this they had to develop their forces of social production. Yet, the very nature of their production was an obstacle to this."[121] As the peasantry are integrated into circuits of capitalist valorization, then, they are also increasingly subject to economic compulsions that conflict with their traditional form of production. At the same time, the social relations of peasant production are not simply eradicated in one fell swoop, but are instead incorporated as an "antagonistic" element within the overall structure of Jamaican capitalism. There is therefore a fundamental contradiction immanent to the process wherein McKay's peasants come to see themselves as "interest bearing" subjects. To the extent that their

[120] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 341.

[121] Post, *Arise*, 39.

livelihood is conditioned by production for the global market, the peasantry are compelled to "develop" class interests that approximate those of the petit bourgeoisie or an embryonic proletariat. To the extent that the peasantry are able to maintain their traditional social relations of production, however, they also retain a foothold in a "moral economy" diametrically opposed to the interests of those classes. The increasingly combined and hybridized form of Jamaican economic production thus impedes the formation of a univocal peasant class consciousness. It is by no means self-evident how the peasantry can, in Marx's terms, transform from a "class in itself" into a "class for itself," since peasants' objective interests as commodity producers increasingly contradict the traditional strategies through which they constituted themselves as a class in the first place.[122] One might go so far as to suggest that for the peasantry to become a class for itself would entail becoming a class against itself. The contradictions of Jamaican class formation, in other words, produce an impasse in the articulation of class identity as a locus of historical agency. The struggle between the two articulated structures of production makes it easy to misrecognize agency as subservience and vice versa; in early twentieth-century Jamaica, capital functions less like a sundial than a distorting mirror, reflecting back an image of community in crisis that is impossible either to ignore or to fully accept. Within this mirror, agency is not being clarified, but contorted, multiplied, rendered alien to itself. It is this historical encounter with the heteronomy of agency, rather than simple despair or lack of political representation, that leads McKay's peasants to proclaim "Wha fe do" instead of asking what is to be done.

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[122] Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1884), 189.

The philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer provided McKay with a conceptual vocabulary that helped the young poet work through this crisis of Jamaican peasant agency. Critical commentary on Schopenhauer's influence on McKay has been sparse. Generally, scholars have treated McKay's Schopenhauerian streak as a sort of distraction, a temporary dalliance with European pessimism on the path to Black radicalism. Cooper sees McKay's "infatuation" with Schopenhauer as an attempt to justify his own youthful melancholy: "For a sensitive young man such as McKay, still very unsure of the direction his life should take, Schopenhauer's bleak and gloomy view of the human situation held a definite romantic appeal."[123] Winston James, meanwhile, notes "an affinity and homology between the conjuncture within which McKay wrote and Schopenhauer's melancholic philosophy" before asserting that "such pessimism was generally foreign to his outlook."[124] Cooper and James, keen to minimize the import of Schopenhauer's impact, locate the basis for the philosopher's appeal in a kind of generalized misery. Schopenhauer thus either helped McKay rationalize his own depressive cynicism, or he provided a philosophical corollary to a Jamaica that was, in McKay's time, "a rather hellish place." James suggests that McKay's "cheerless philosophy" in poems such as "Whe' Fe Do?" "cannot be completely attributed to his encounter with Schopenhauerian philosophy…The worldview of the peasants themselves might have showed him as much."[125] Indeed, while James is here attempting to counterpose McKay's efforts to represent the "articulate consciousness of the peasantry" against his more arcane philosophical proclivities, these comments also prompt a fruitful line of inquiry about the messy entanglement of discrete moral-philosophical systems in

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[123] Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 44.

[124] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 121.

[125] Ibid.

McKay's poetics. Rather than demarcate a rigid line between McKay's European philosophical influences and his efforts to represent peasant consciousness, I want to pursue the implications of James' suggestion that, as we might rephrase it, turn-of-the-century Jamaican peasants were "already Schopenhauerian." This approach attempts to avoid a unidirectional account of intellectual influence, and instead takes for granted that McKay's reception of Schopenhauer was itself heavily mediated by his engagement with peasants' "ways o' thinking."

The most explicit allusion to Schopenhauer in McKay's corpus appears in "To W.G.G," the penultimate poem of the collection *Constab Ballads*. Like many poems in the collection, "To W.G.G." records McKay's disillusionment with his stint on the Jamaican constabulary, a job that required the young poet to police Black people, including many displaced peasants, in the capital city of Kingston. McKay's service as a constab prompted a crisis of conscience and a desire, as he testifies throughout the collection, to return to "de soil" of the Clarendon hills.[126] In the preface to *Constab Ballads* McKay confesses "that I had not in me the stuff that goes into the making of a good constable; for I am so constituted that imagination outruns discretion, and it is my misfortune to have a most improper sympathy with wrongdoers."[127] Later, in the semi-autobiographical short story "When I Pounded the Pavement," McKay would recall the inner turmoil and shame he experienced while enforcing colonial vagrancy laws. "As a son of the peasants," explains the story's guilt-wracked narrator, "I also had in my blood the peasant's instinctive hostility for police people."[128] In "To W.G.G." McKay proclaims his intention to flee the "miserable wul'" of the constabulary, inviting a comrade to join him in a hermetic retreat to

[126] McKay, "A Labourer's Life Give Me," *CP* 122.

[127] McKay, Preface to *Constab Ballads*, *CP*, 295.

[128] McKay, "When I Pounded the Pavement," in *Gingertown* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 211.

the countryside: “Come flee de envy an’ de strife,/ Before dey ruin our life:/ Come to de hills; dey may be drear,/ But we can shun de evil here.”[129] While inhabiting the classical rhetorical posture of a “passionate shepherd,” the poem abjures conventional pastoral structures of rural idealization, emphasizing instead the harsh and unpleasant aspects of the countryside: “De northers now are blowin’ chill,/ De fog hangs dismal on de hill,/ An’ sometimes fe long dreary days/ De sun is wrapt up in-a haze.”[130] Much like other injunctions to contentment in McKay’s corpus, then, this poem seeks to cultivate a positive attachment to the “peace an’ calm” of the hills while simultaneously moderating expectations about what this rural world can provide. As in “Out of Debt” and “Wha’ Fe Do,” contentment here appears as a renunciatory gesture, a way of circumscribing and nullifying one’s “ambitions” and reflexive desires.

Here, however, McKay’s invitation to rural retreat takes on a more starkly ambivalent and overtly philosophical character: “De helpless playt’ing of a Will,/ We’ll spend our short days here; an’ still,/ Though prisoners, feel somehow free,/ To live our lives o’ misery.”[131] This stanza, with its apparently self-contradictory articulations of freedom and coercion, recasts the move from city to country as an existential confrontation with a crisis of sovereign subjectivity. These lines complicate the conventional pastoral understanding of rural retreat as “escape,” as well as the teleological Enlightenment conception of individual moral and intellectual growth as a process of self-emancipation. If the poems we’ve surveyed thus far employ the discourse of contentment to negotiate the various extrinsic limits imposed “on” Jamaican peasants’ agency, here McKay extrapolates the peasants’ moral economy into a philosophical proposition about the

[129] McKay, “To W.G.G,” *CP*, 125.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ibid.

limits “of” agency. Instead of positing a political will that is constrained by external forces, McKay posits a Will that is itself constraining, reducing the subject it possesses into a “helpless playt’ing.” Here, in other words, McKay does not pit agency against coercion but instead evokes a contradiction internal to the composition of agential subjectivity. To describe oneself as a “play’ting” of the Will and consign oneself to a life of “misery” may look a cynical, and even despairing gesture. Yet McKay is unwilling to relinquish an aspiration towards “freedom,” as he makes clear in asserting that he and his comrade will feel “somehow free.” The adverb suggests that freedom is not to be sacrificed, but rendered indeterminate: At the same time that McKay calls for a return from the city, then, he displaces the idea of the country as a site of stabilizing convention, the “knowable community” that provides relief from the alienation of modernity.[132] The country appears here less as a “home” than as a laboratory, a zone of politico-philosophical experimentation in which liberal antinomies of free will and coercion are scrambled and reimagined.

In calling his friend to join him in the hills as a ““helpless playt’ing of a Will,” McKay reworks the peasants’ moral economy of contentment through the categories of Schopenhauerian philosophy. In *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer defines the Will as a blind, suprahistorical force that manifests in various individual acts or phenomenal “objectivizations.” For Schopenhaur the Will constitutes the world as thing-in-itself. Insofar as we claim to grasp the inner essence of objects that appear in the world of representations, then, we do so only by considering such phenomena, like our own bodies, as “objectivizations” of Will.[133] Schopenhauer is anti-dualist in that he rejects any notion of willing or volition as a purely

[132] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 165.

[133] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

cognitive process that occurs first in the mental realm and then interacts as a cause with events unfolding in the physical realm.[134] He is also profoundly anti-rationalist in his conceptualization of a Will that resists determination by conscious thought. The ordinary conscious decisions people make are not, for Schopenhauer, qualitatively different from their desires, appetites, or bodily functions; these are all merely diverse manifestations or objectivizations of Will. For Schopenhauer, the Will is not properly understood as something one possesses or controls, then, but is instead a blind impersonal force that takes provisional form in individual acts of conscious willing.

Schopenhauer's categorical distinction between the Will itself and its phenomenal objectivizations has important implications for his conceptualization of human freedom. Somewhat counterintuitively, Schopenhauer argues that while the Will itself is free, humans themselves do not possess an empirical free will. The freedom of the Will itself does not extend directly to its objectivizations in the form of individual persons: "Freedom of will as thing in itself … in no way transfers immediately to its phenomenon, not even where the latter has achieved the highest level of visibility, thus not to rational animals with individual characters, i.e., persons. The latter are never free, although they are the phenomenon of a free will."[135] By elevating the Will into a noumenal force that exists independently of and prior to its phenomena, Schopenhauer inverts the relation between conscious thought and free will posited by thinkers such as Spinoza and Descartes. According to these philosophers, notes Schopenhauer, people become what they are as a consequence of their cognizance; they first recognize something as good, and, as a consequence, will it. For Schopenhauer, by contrast, Will is the original,

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[134] Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

[135] Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 340.

determining force and cognizance merely a secondary supplement. "I, to the contrary, say: he is his own work in advance of all cognizance, and the latter is merely added on in order to illuminate it. For this reason, he cannot resolve to be such or such person, nor can he become another, but he is once and for all, and after that recognizes what he is. For the others, he wills he what he recognizes; for me, he recognizes he what he wills."[136] When a person is confronted with a choice that requires them to weigh conflicting motives—for example, between immediate gratification and long-term health—they have the illusion of exerting conscious intellectual control over their will. Schopenhauer argues that in such a situation, however, the intellect can do no more than illuminate the "make-up of the motives." One's intellect thus "awaits the real decision just as passively and with the same excited curiosity as it would that of a foreign will…it is incapable of determining the will itself, since the latter is entirely inaccessible to it, indeed even, as we have seen, unfathomable."[137]

As Schopenhauer elaborates the implications of the difference between the Will itself and its phenomena, the resonance between his philosophy and the peasants' moral economy of contentment becomes increasingly clear. The premise that humans are merely phenomena of a Will that they are unable to fathom or alter leads Schopenhauer to severely circumscribe the capacity of individuals and groups to deliberately enact change in the material world. "For since the entire person is only the phenomenon of his will," he notes, "nothing could be more perverse than, proceeding on the basis of reflection, willing to be something other than one is; for that is an immediate contradiction of the will with itself."[138] The freedom of the Will as a thing-in-itself

[136] Ibid., 346.

[137] Ibid., 344.

[138] Ibid., 360.

therefore does not expand but severely restricts the sphere of humanity's agential self-expression: Since we are nothing other than what our Will has made us, it is fruitless to imagine that we can will ourselves to become what we are not. Schopenhauer's pragmatic prescriptions for individual action in the world are therefore opposite of what one might expect of a philosophy that accords such decisive importance to the will. Life appears in Schopenhauer's philosophy as a Sisyphean struggle with a Will that, even as it conditions all our daily actions and conscious behavior, is itself blind and directionless: "We are like captured elephants that horrifically rage and wrestle for many days, until they see that it is fruitless and then, suddenly composed, offer their necks to the yoke, forever tamed."[139] We reach a state of enlightened contentment, not unlike McKay's speaker in "To W.G.G.," when we realize the extent to which we are "playthings" of this will, and are therefore better able to manage and control its empirical manifestations in our conscious desires. Much like the speakers of poems such as "Wha fe Do" and "Out of Debt," Schopenhauer cautions against allowing one's discontentment to become the basis for one's actions. "Knowledge of one's own disposition and one's capacities of every sort, and their unalterable limits, is in this respect the surest way to attain to the greatest possible self-content… An ill that has befallen us does not torment us as much as the thought of the circumstances by which it could have been averted."[140]

These cautions against the torment of discontentment make plain the conservative political implications of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Indeed, any project that seeks to cultivate and actualize a notion of collective agency—a project rooted in the ideal of self-determination, for example—would appear to Schopenhauer as an illusory objectivization of a blind and

[139] Ibid., 361.

[140] Ibid., 360.

purposeless Will. Such striving for social transformation, Schopenhauer would likely caution, arises “from lack, from discontent with one’s state, and so is suffering so long as it is not satisfied. But no satisfaction is enduring…”[141] To assert one’s desire for change through protest or political mobilization on this account appears, not as an expression of freedom or agency, but of one’s subordination to a perpetual cycle of blind striving. To the extent that Schopenahaeur’s philosophy allows for the possibility of an empirical freedom, this freedom appears only in contradiction with, rather than as an expression of, the Sisyphean striving of the Will. Real freedom can become visible in the phenomenon only where “it puts an end to that which is making its appearance.”[142] The freedom that only properly belongs to the Will as thing-in-itself, in other words, manifests in the material world only by suspending or rejecting the Will’s phenomenal objectivizations. Freedom of the Will is materialized only when it stands in open contradiction with itself: Through the renunciation, for example, of one’s desire for food, sex, material success, and indeed life itself. Such self-nullification of the will, Schopenhauer contends, is all that allows the freedom of the Will as thing-in-itself to intrude into its phenomena. Schopenhauer thus concludes by preaching a doctrine of ascetic withdrawal and self-renunciation: “The will now turns away from life; it now shudders before its enjoyments, in which it is cognizant of its affirmation. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure and complete will-lessness.”[143]

Why might such a philosophy hold appeal for a poet who seeks to represent the “articulate consciousness” of the early twentieth-century Jamaican peasantry? The

[141] Ibid., 422.

[142] Ibid., 467.

[143] Ibid., 440.

Schopenhauerian turn in McKay's thinking should not be conflated with a generic fatalism or religious notions of pre-destination, although it is probably clear from the above summary how Schopenhauer's philosophy might nonetheless appear consonant with these and other deterministic epistemologies. The distinctiveness of Schopenhauer's philosophy lies, however, in its internalization and sublimation of older religious conceptions of fatality into a secular account of individual subject formation. Conversely, the significance of this philosophy can also be understood as residing in its depersonalization and re-enchantment of a component of modern subjectivity—the Will—that had previously served as a central theoretical pillar in the evolution of what C.B. Macpherson calls the "political theory of possessive individualism."[144] One of the key assumptions of possessive individualism, according to Macpherson, is "freedom from dependence on the wills of others."[145] Hobbes, a key figure in Macpherson's genealogy, "discard[ed] traditional concepts of society, justice, and natural law," and "deduced political rights and obligation from the interest and will of dissociated individuals."[146] Before Hobbes, argues MacPherson, the human capacities and wants that grounded politico-theoretical accounts of rights and obligations were broadly understood as "effects of the purposes of Nature or will of God…Purpose or Will, brought in from outside the observed universe, was hypostatized as an outside force constantly imposing itself (by way of reason or revelation, or both) on men."[147] Hobbes "reversed this assumption," grounding rights and obligations instead in "the need of each

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[144] C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). 77

[145] Ibid., 263.

[146] Ibid., 1.

[147] Ibid., 77.

human mechanism to maintain its motion."[148] Hobbes defined the Will as the "last appetite in deliberating," the expression of an individual's calculation about whether a given action will satisfy their appetite.[149] If Hobbes, and the political theory of possessive individualism more broadly, reversed traditional accounts of human wants as expressions of an external Will, and located the Will instead within an individuated human subject, Schopenhauer reversed this reversal: While taking as his starting point the idea of the individual subject as the embodiment of a will, he proceeds to re-hypostasize this individuated will into an atemporal and unknowable noumenon the governs our actions and decisions as though it were an external, alien force.

The extension of Schopenhauer's influence through an imperial circuit of British cultural production thus registers a generalized exhaustion with the model of rational self-possessive subjectivity that had taken hold within the ideological apparatus of an expanding market society. Schopenhauer's reconceptualization of the Will as a noumenal force that subjects humanity to endless cycles of blind and hopeless striving radically overturns the "sanguine images if individual autonomy, private volition, free will, and free agency" promulgated by the liberal legalism of early industrial capitalism.[150] Indeed, Schopenhauer's analogy of human striving to the horrific raging and wrestling of a captured elephant more or less inverts the rational utility maximizer of possessive market society.[151] Schopenhauerian pessimism, in other words, gathers its moral force from an inchoate recognition that the organizing fictions of freedom under capitalism had themselves become instruments of coercion. Schopenhauer himself, of course, did

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[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid., 33.

[150] Banaji, *Theory as History*, 131.

[151] C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 53-54. We might detect in Schopenhauer's argument that it is "perverse" to imagine that one can become something "other than one is" a rebuttal of the Hobbesian vision of society as an incessant competitive struggle of individuals for power over one another.

not advance any critique of capitalist social relations, but instead abstracted the Will into a transhistorical noumenon in order to reveal its vicelike grip on all human activity. Schopenhauer fetishized the Will to falsify the idea of free willing subjectivity. Nonetheless, there is an important, if only formal, resonance between Schopenhauerian and Marxist efforts to unmask the false appearance of freedom represented in acts of an individuated will.[152] The Schopenhauerian Will, perceptible only in its phenomena but never in itself, can be understood as a cipher for the enigma of capital, an effort to name and make intelligible the abstraction and depersonalization of coercive social relationships that subtends the transition to possessive market society.

While Cooper and James describe the Schopenhauerian influence on McKay as opposed to or in tension with the author's expression of "defiance and struggle," the account I've provided attempts to explicate how these two aspects of his poetics form a contradictory unity. Schopenhauer's philosophy indeed takes the fact of struggle as its point of departure; the state of enlightened will-lessness arrives, on Schopenhauer's account, only after one has gone through the compulsory period of raging and wrestling that arises from discontentment with one's state. McKay, like Schopenhauer, tries to take account of discontentment and resolve it. Thus, his dialect poems tend to follow the narrative arc of Schopenhauerian enlightenment, culminating with the renunciation of a desired object whose absence had previously triggered a state of discontent, conflict, or agitation. This decathexis from the unobtainable object does not reveal a utopian zone of freedom outside the Will, however, but only allows temporary respite from the Will's compulsion. Schopenhauerian enlightenment in other words requires, not a simple rejection of one's drives and attachments, but an acknowledgement of one's irreducible conditioning by a Will that can ultimately never be satisfied. Suffering and contentment; rage

[152] Banaji, *Theory as History*, 133.

and consolation; striving and renunciation: In Schopenhauer, as in McKay, these ideas evolve in a fugue movement, taking on meaning in contrapuntal patterns of assertion and withdrawal. They reach their dialectical resolution in a moment defined as the simultaneous apotheosis and self-cancellation of the Will. It is this state that McKay gestures towards when he tells his comrade that "Though prisoners" they'll "feel somehow free."[153]

McKay's poetic career began in earnest with the 1911-1912 series for the *Gleaner*, two months before his discharge from the constabulary. While serving as a constab, McKay had pursued a course of study in European philosophy, including Schopenhauer, under the guidance of Walter Jekyll.[154] As Winston James' commentary suggests, it is impossible to determine where Schopenhauer's influence on McKay's poetry ends and where a more direct or unmediated representation of the peasants' "worldview" begins. One might nonetheless note a manifest Schopenhaurianism in lines such as the following from "Christmas in De Air": "O sweet life so sad, so gay,/ Oh why did you come my way,/ All your gaiety to vaunt/ An' yet torture me wid want?"[155] Here McKay reproduces in dialect a classically Schopenhauerian sense of despair with one's conditioning by unsatisfiable desires and needs. McKay, of course, does not need Schopenhauer to tell him that the peasantry are starving. There is a significant difference, however, between asserting the imperative to eat and lamenting one's conditioning by that imperative. If the former is more obviously amenable to a political demand or a plan of action, the latter removes the expression of want from such directly instrumental purpose. While they appear in *The Daily Gleaner*, ostensibly as part of an intervention in a debate on tax policy,

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[153] McKay, "To W.G.G," in *CP*, 126.

[154] Wayne F. Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, 41.

[155] McKay, "Christmas in de Air," *CP,* 8.

these lines have no addressee other than "life" itself; there is no public sphere or polity in which these words can acquire purposive significance, no course of remedial action that they can inspire. A continuous oscillation between the purposive and the nonpurposive is a defining dynamic of the periodical poems, and, arguably, the key point of intersection between Schopenhauerian philosophy and McKay's representation of peasant consciousness. McKay does not simply ventriloquize the tenets of Schopenhauerian philosophy through peasant speech. Instead, the periodical poems perform what we might think of as a Schopenhauerian dialectic of political subject formation. On one hand, these poems announce a new set of imperatives, proposing solutions and new strategies for adapting to the mounting crisis of peasant contraction. In this way, McKay attempts to represent what we can call the political will of the peasantry. Yet these articulations (or "phenomenal objectivizations") of the will are no simple assertions of peasant agency, but negotiations with a set of constraints that cumulatively impel a collective shift away from the peasants' traditional strategies of adaptation—a shift, in other words, that threatens the collective survival of the peasantry itself. While they seem on one hand to provide nascent articulations of a political will, then, McKay's speakers also refuse and renounce the image of political futurity manifested in their own exhortations to action. These poems thus take on the appearance of self-cancelling political speech acts, negating in one breath the political imperatives asserted in another, quieting in one stanza the agitational rhetoric of another. McKay navigates these poles, not out of indecisiveness, but in order to curb the potential threat to peasant survival augured by a novel "objectivization" of their will.

In "Peasants' Ways o' Thinkin,'" which appeared in *The Daily Gleaner* of January 27, 1912, McKay relays the grievances of the poor peasantry for broad consumption and deliberation, acting as a translator and intermediary between subaltern and middle-class publics.

The title of the poem promises a general representation of peasant opinion with practical-reformative aims. McKay's speaker, however, immediately registers ambivalence about his precarious insertion into the abstract equality of public sphere discourse. The opening stanza employs the rhetorical convention of apophasis, perhaps to deflate the heightened expectations that animate the occasion of peasant speech as a moment of public political theater: "Well, boys, I'm not a a gwin to preach,/Nor neider mekin' a long speech;/But only few short wuds fe say/ 'Bout pressin queshtons o' de day."[156] After this opening qualification the speaker proceeds to justify his choice of verse as a medium of public discourse: "For cordin as I mighta run,/ It may gie you a little fun,/ An' mek I nice, fur as nice goes,/ Mo' dan de bare unreadin' prose./"[157] The voice McKay adopts to channel peasant consciousness into public expression is deflationary, almost to point of defensiveness. The speaker is amicable, but tentative and self-effacing in his public presence; the conventional throat-clearing of the opening stanzas seem designed to inoculate the speaker against the likely possibility that his solicitations will go unheeded. There is, moreover, a fundamental ambiguity structuring McKay's representation of the speaker's intended addressee: It is unclear, that is, whether McKay intends to represent the speaker as conscious of the implied *Gleaner* readership, or whether the poem is in fact staging an intra-communal Black peasant discourse that is manifestly "for" the wider Jamaican public but notionally innocent of its presence. While the speaker casually addresses his audience as "boys," suggesting an informal and familiar conversation between acquaintances, there is also little effort to mask the poem's status as a pragmatic appeal for a specific set of reforms from the *Gleaner*'s readers who, after all, are better positioned than the poor peasantry to access the material levers

[156] McKay, "Peasants' Ways O' Thinkin,'" *CP*, 9.

[157] Ibid.

of political power. McKay's poem thus performs the kind of rhetorical indirection that Lauren Berlant describes as typical of "juxtapolitical" discursive spaces: The peasant speaks, on one hand, in a conventional political register that insists on the possibility of his grievances mattering to the broader Jamaican public; at the same time, he circulates the quotidian common sense of an autonomous moral community whose continuity provides relief from the racist morass of official politics.[158]

As it veers between these discrepant discursive registers, the poem's status as a political speech act becomes increasingly vexed. McKay's immediate aim is to protest a regressive tax policy that placed a disproportionate and, by the 1910s, increasingly unbearable burden on Jamaica's Black poor. Winston James observes that between 1870 and 1910 customs duties were regressive "'per se' (exacted regardless of income) but made doubly so by the higher rate imposed on items consumed by the masses."[159] In the months leading up to the publication of McKay's poem the question of whether to remove or lower import duties had been debated regularly in the Jamaican press. While the Gleaner had published a variety of perspectives on the tax question, including an ongoing column called "Tariff Reform" arguing for a reduction of import duties, McKay's poem appears to be the only attempt to represent anything approximating the perspective of small peasant proprietors.[160] Here, however, it is necessary to return to the theme of historical belatedness as an animating condition of McKay's peasant voice. By 1912 the process of peasant contraction appeared irreversible: import duties, to be sure, exacerbated the "indirect expropriation" of the peasantry, but, as we have seen, the real

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[158] Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[159] James, *A Fierce Hatred*, 15.

[160] Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner*, 64.

driving force of peasant dispossession was the rise of the fruit trade. Already in the 1890s, notes Holt, the government's efforts to support peasant proprietorship "was much like a finger in a dike holding back a capitalist flood."[161] McKay in effect is compelled to mourn the decline of the small peasantry at the same time that he conjures their voice in public discourse. The burden of this historical conjuncture weighs heavily on McKay's speaker, whose litany of grievances registers growing despondence about the prospects for significant amelioration. Import duties are only one of the manifold forms of exploitation that extract value from the Black poor: the high price of imported goods is compounded by the tax "on we t'atch hut," chronically low wages on the estates ("De pay so lee, boys"), and Syrian shopkeepers who charge "At double too de price or more." So while the speaker "wouldn' mind ef dem could try/ Mek calico cheaper fe buy," such a reduction on import duties would be too little too late: "An' yet, dough t'ings might cheaper be,/ Life caan' be much better fe we;/ Jamaica do'n de hill a go,/ An' neber shall be like befo'."[162] Here, in what might appear to be a self-undermining rhetorical maneuver, the speaker shifts from an articulation of concrete grievances to the resigned and melancholic tone of elegy. The statement "Jamaica do'n de hill a go,/ An' neber shall be like befo,'" more than any other in the poem, clarifies the problem-space of peasant politics in McKay's wider corpus: This is a moment defined by a receding horizon of political expectation, by the "slowly settling loss of any acceptable future."[163] Yet the peasant at the same time refuses to consign himself to the dustbin of history. The question instead is one of adjustment to and persistence within a situation of radically depleted possibility.

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[161] Holt, The Problem of Freedom, 339.

[162] McKay, "Peasants' Ways," 10.

[163] Raymond Williams qtd. In David Scott, *Conscripts*, 2.

The conclusion at which the peasant arrives concerning the avenues of remedial action is a portentous one: Indeed, in a few short stanzas the speaker of "Peasants Ways O Thinking" announces the onset of the historical transition that will form the backdrop for much Black Caribbean politics in the decades to come. As conditions continue to worse, warns the peasant, the Black masses of Jamaica are steeling themselves to try their luck abroad:

> For hardly can de buccra find
> What passin in de black man's mind;
> He tellin' us we ought to stay
> But did is wha' we got to say:
>
> "We hea' a callin from Colon,
> We hea' a callin' from Limon,
> Let's quit de t'ankless toil an' fret
> Fe where a better pay we'll get"[164]

The expanding market for colonial migrant labor in the U.S. administered Panama Canal Zone and the fruit plantations of Central America, then, will provide an economic outlet, and perhaps even a certain kind of political future, for Jamaica's dispossessed peasantry. The growing peasant exodus indeed heralds, not only a demographic shift, but a new political consciousness, one whose consequences will ramify in complex and heterogeneous ways across the hemisphere. Yet the familiar story of early twentieth century Black migration, which so often gets assimilated into epochal tradition-modernity metanarratives, can blind us to the particular local meanings ascribed to this shift in what McKay would have us understand as "peasants way o' thinking"—in the moment, that is, prior to departure. Indeed, the political future projected by McKay's incipiently mobile peasantry diverges in significant ways from the redemptive migration narrative that will later be popularized by the intellectuals of the New Negro

[164] McKay, "Peasants' Ways," 11.

movement. While figures like Locke, W.A. Domingo, and McKay himself will later define the move from country to city in terms of a leap from the "medieval" to the modern, the speaker of McKay's 1912 poem is more reserved in his appraisal of outmigration as a politico-historical event.[165] The chorus of peasants who hear the calling from Colon are, at one level, announcing their refusal to allow the process of dispossession to reduce them to a pliable and dependent plantation workforce. Their determination to pursue better wages in foreign lands in this way intimates the political consciousness of an embryonic proletariat. Pivoting from the elegiac tones of the preceding stanzas, the peasants now make a virtue of necessity: Given that chances for survival are already increasingly mediated by the wage-relation, that is, the struggle against the stranglehold of the Jamaican economy now appears as the struggle for work rather than against it. Cast into the ranks of a burgeoning labor reserve army, the dispossessed "peasantry" in effect stage a mass walkout, harnessing their capacity as sellers of labor-power to secure a modicum of agency from de "tankless toil and fret" of the home economy.

Yet the peasant speaker is far from sanguine about the sacrifice this transition entails. "Though ober deh de law is bad,/ An' dey no know de name o' God," he admits, "Yet dere is nuff work fe we han's,/ Reward in gol' fe beat de ban's."[166] The peasant weighs the economic rewards of migration against risks of contracting malaria, the need to learn a new language, "beastly 'panish beer," the "never ceasin' wear an tear" of hard labor, the loss of control over work hours—in short, all of the social alienation and exploitation suffered by a precarious migrant workforce.[167] The decision to leave is no straightforward expression of emancipation

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[165] Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

[166] McKay, "Peasants' Ways," 11.

[167] Ibid., 11-12.

from a benighted past; nor does it promise ascendance to a condition of historical agency; nor, finally, does it counterpose a future "modern" freedom against a present "medieval" unfreedom. These heroic accounts of migrant subjectivity are far from our speaker's mind. Indeed, McKay's peasant is clear that freedom resides in the world from which he departs:

> De freedom here we'll maybe miss,
> Our ol' rum an' our Joanie's kiss,
> De prattlin' of our little Nell,
> De chimin' o' de village bell
>
> De John-t'-whits in de mammee tree,
> An' all de sights we lub fe see;
> All dis, I know, we must exchange
> For t'ings dat will seem bad an' strange.[168]

The transformation that occurs between the earlier litany of complaints against taxation and these stanzas is a subtle one, and not properly captured by the dominant Harlem Renaissance trope of self-emancipation through outmigration. The dawning realization of the need to leave yields, as a quiet and paradoxical corollary, an altered perspective on "here" as well. If the early stanzas catalogue the depredations that render life in Jamaica unlivable, registering deepening cynicism about the possibility of substantive change, now, on the cusp of departure, the image of home undergoes a slight but significant revision. Yet it isn't "Jamaica," exactly, that's being mourned, or at least not the same Jamaica that has gone "do'n de hill." For part of the shift in perspective that has occurred is one from the public arena of policy debate to the village, whose people, rituals, and sights and sounds constitute the peasants' "known community."[169] This community isn't simply recalled, but becomes knowable in a new way through the proleptic realization of its

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[168] Ibid., 11.

[169] Williams, *The Country and the City*, 165.

immanent loss. Thus, the peasant village, for the first time in the poem, is rendered vividly particular through names, designating networks of kinship and a deep knowledge of the landscape. Our speaker brings these "minor intimacies" into focus as the anchoring affective bonds of peasant collectivity even while detaching from Jamaica as a viable scene of political intervention.[170] Even more painful, though, is the recognition that it is precisely on account of their unwavering commitment to the preservation of this community that the peasants are compelled to seek work abroad. If the poem has thus far shifted uneasily between elegy for the dispossessed peasantry and the collective political self-assertion of a nascent proletariat, the concluding stanzas attempt a rapport between these modes. Wages earned abroad will be sent home in the form of remittances: "But poo'ness deh could neber come,/ An dere'll be cash fe sen' back home/ Fe de old heads,/ de bastard babe,/ An' somet'ing ober still fe sabe."[171] Temporary estrangement from home will ultimately allow, the speaker imagines, the continuity of the community of smallholders whose interests have been rendered invisible in Jamaican politics. Migration will therefore provide the means of repair for the very historical crisis it indexes. "An' dough for years we stay away/ We're boun' to come back here some day… A piece o' lan' fe raise two goat,/A little rum fe ease we t'roat,/ A little cot res' we head—/An' we're contended tell we dead."[172] On this account the peasants imagine their exodus, not as the onset of a new historical epoch or radical challenge to existing social relations, but as the beginning of a long and circuitous back to their freeholds. They will, in short, undergo a process of temporary proletarianization in order to reconstitute themselves as a peasantry.

[170] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue." Critical Inquiry 24, no. 2 (1998): 285.

[171] Claude McKay, "Peasants' Ways," 12.

[172] Ibid.

“Peasants Ways O’ Thinking” thus ends, as we have seen, on a deflationary and distinctly unheroic note. If Black outmigration will later be narrativized as the watershed in a new era of race consciousness, here the journey abroad resolves with an apparent restoration of the old regime:

> Now here dere’s poo’ness eberywhere,
> But den it’s home an’ very dear,
> An’ dough for years we stay away,
> We’re boun’ to come back here some day.
>
> We may n’t be rich like buccra folk;
> For us de white, for dem de yolk,
> Da’s de way dat the egg divide,
> An we content wi’ de outside.
>
> Havin’ we owna mancha-root
> Havin’ we dandy Sunday suit,
> We’ll happy wi’ our modest lot
> An’ won’t grudge buccra wha’ dem got.
>
> A piece o’ lan fe raise two goat,
> A little rum fe ease we t’roat,
> A little cot fe res’ we head—
> An’ we’re contented tell were dead.[173]

To be sure, this minimalist vision of rural domesticity reads on one level as a political anticlimax, a retreat from the nascently oppositional voice of the previous stanzas. Given his keen awareness of the sacrifices entailed by outmigration, however, the speaker’s concluding pivot towards the ideal of contentment is not so easy to dismiss as a mere reversion to stereotype. McKay appears to soft-pedal the radicalizing thrust of the peasants’ speech by acquiescing to racially sanctioned inequalities (“For us de white, for dem de yolk”). Yet the speaker’s contentment with “de outside” is not only a capitulatory gesture, for it also quietly affirms the vision of smallholder autonomy (“Havin we owna mancha-root”) as a minimal demand,

[173] Ibid.

implying that certain baseline social requirements must be met to ward off the threat of working-class radicalization. The relevance of Schopenhauer to "Peasants Ways O' Thinking" should indeed be understood as arising, not simply from the poem's expression of despair or cynicism, but rather from its oblique and counterintuitive representation of the peasantry as bearers of a political will. It is the peasants' commitment to their own identity as a peasantry, according to the paradoxical logic of the poem, that motivates them to abandon their freeholds for "ways that may seem bad and strange." The peasants' attachment to their traditional mode of production, however, makes them keenly aware that the decision to seek work abroad also compromises the very economic autonomy they seek to defend. To the extent that smallholder production remains a viable possibility, the poem suggests, this will form a bulwark against an embrace of working-class organization; on the other hand, to the extent that wage-labor forms a basic condition of survival, this necessity will also militate against the peasants' "contentment." From the peasants' vantage point, to renounce the opportunity for better wages abroad would be fatal, but so would undergoing a full transition from smallholder production to wage labor. The expression of peasant "agency" as a function of their capacity as wage earners thus does not translate into an embrace of wage-earning as the basis of class identity, for this would itself entail submitting to the process of dispossession that the peasants aim to curb. The peasants' "modest" political goals of land retention and autonomy are, given the forces arrayed against them, not really all that modest.[174] Indeed, this "modest" vision of smallholder subsistence smuggles an act of refusal into the form of a capitulation. Much like the ascetic telos of Schopenhauerian enlightenment, the speaker's imagined return to the freehold appears at one and the same time as the self-negation of the peasants' Will and its fulfillment at a higher level.

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[174] I agree here with James. See *A Fierce Hatred*, 138.

More than the poems that ultimately appear in McKay's published collections, "Peasants Ways O' Thinking" allows peasants' discontentment to become the basis for their action. Yet the discontentment-motivated action proposed here is, if taken to its logical conclusion, a program for the dissolution of the peasantry *as* a peasantry. Critics of McKay's pivot to conservatism in the final stanzas underestimate the severity of this paradox, and leave unaddressed the structural impediments to class formation that prompt this compromise. Yet it is not at all clear what organizational form might emerge within this conjuncture to overcome widening fractures of the peasant community and channel its diverse coordinates into a political unity. The partial re-formation of the peasantry as a migratory proletariat disarticulates the social relations of peasant production, separating the peasant labor process from the freeholds and depriving independent agricultural producers, not only of their families, but of their familial workforce. The process of geographic dispersion at the same time dislodges peasants' remunerative activity from the symbolic locus of their social identity, creating the basis for the "long-range nationalism" that will define Black Caribbean politics in the years to come.[175] What political subject will form out of this process? Does it even make sense, at this stage, to speak of a single unified process of political subject formation? In economic terms, the Jamaican peasantry appear as workers without a class; in political terms, they form a community without a polity. We can grasp the logic of Schopenhauer as a philosophical interlocutor, then, without needing to reproduce Schopenhauer's reification of "Will": The class conjuncture of the early twentieth-century Caribbean is amenable to Schopenhauerian interpretation precisely because this conjuncture forces a recognition of the will, not as an extratemporal noumenon, but as a manifestation of

[175] Robert Hill, "General Introduction," The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume XI: The Caribbean Diaspora, 1910-1920 (Duke University Press, 2011), lxvii.

conflicting social and economic necessities. The process of peasant contraction gradually shifts the terrain on which willful subjectivity is constituted, necessitating new adaptive strategies while simultaneously preserving a vantage point (i.e., the "traditional" smallholder perspective) from which those strategies themselves appear as the reflex of an exogenous shock. "Contentment with one's lot" is not the only available response to such a conjuncture; nor is Schopenhauerian pessimism. Nonetheless, the contradictions that produce these interpretations will not disappear even when McKay explicitly embraces political radicalism.

*A Class in Search of Form*

In the spring of 1922, following the publication of the poetry collection *Harlem Shadows*, Claude McKay began his "magic pilgrimage" from the U.S. to Russia.[176] Since the publication of "If We Must Die," McKay had been at the center of early efforts to steer the New Negro movement in a Marxist direction.[177] A contributor to Max Eastman's socialist magazine *The Liberator* as well as Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Worker's Dreadnought*, McKay had felt the gravitational pull of the worker's republic since the 1917 revolution. "Where? Russia signaled. A vast upheaval and grand experiment. What could I understand there? What could I learn for my life, for my work?...Millions of ordinary human beings and thousands of writers were stirred by the Russian thunder rolling round the world. And as a social-minded being and a poet, I too was moved."[178] Though arriving without invitation to the Fourth COMINTERN Congress, McKay's reputation as a radical poet gained him favor with the Bolshevik elite, and he ultimately became

[176] McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, 118-121.

[177] See Winston James, "Letters from London in Black and Red: Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey and the *Negro World,*" *History Workshop Journal* 85 (Spring 2018): 281-293.

[178] McKay, *A Long Way*, 121.

a key figure in debates over the so-called "Negro Question" (In his autobiography McKay claimed, with some exaggeration, to have "precipitated" the Negro Question by arguing that the secret dissemination of radical propaganda was necessary "only…among the Negroes of the South.")[179] Leon Trotsky commissioned McKay to write *The Negroes in America*, a study which combined sociological analysis of racial oppression in the U.S. South and the British West Indies with commentary on Black literature and art. This text, as we have seen, attempted what may be the first properly historical materialist account of Black literary and linguistic development in the Americas. Indeed, if we consider McKay's commentary on Black aesthetics in *The Negroes* alongside his autobiographical account of the Russian sojourn, it becomes clear that the poet was, in addition to debating questions of Communist strategy and organization, grappling with a literary corollary to the Negro Question: How did, and how might, the contemporary trends of Black literature relate to the emergent politico-aesthetic doctrine of the proletarian arts movement?

The intertwined problematics of class formation and literary form that preoccupied McKay in *The Negroes in America* confronted him once again in his tour of the Soviet Union's nascent cultural institutions. McKay recalls attending a poetry reading in a club on Arbat street, "to hear the proletarian poets read and discuss their compositions."[180] Though accompanied by an interpreter, McKay's aesthetic experience of the event was largely restricted to elements of sound and prosody: "Without understanding the language I was able to appreciate certain poems for their swing and movement and the voice of the reciter." Thus limited to nonlinguistic forms

[179] McKay, *A Long Way*, 140.

[180] Ibid., 144-145.

of aesthesis, McKay finds himself struck by one reader who, by sonic and visual impression, stands out from the rest:

> I was particularly pleased with the poem of a slim young man in a coarse peasant smock buttoned up to his chin, and with a worried, unhappy expression in his sensitive features. I knew at once that he was a peasant become proletarian like myself. He gave a charming poem. Even before translation I knew from its communicative color and tone and the soft threne running through it like a silver chord that it expressed an individual longing for the life of the country, perhaps the ways that nevermore would be.[181]

The usually reticent McKay is moved to the point of effusive applause by the "intellectual anxiety" on the poet's face, which "showed clearly that he was a little bewildered by that world-moving social shake-up." When audience members critique the absence of proletarian content in the reading, McKay intervenes on the poet's behalf: "They all jumped on him. 'Alexis you are not a proletarian poet!' And they criticized his subject matter. So I asked my interpreter to let me say a word. I said that I thought it was natural for a man who had lived in the country to express his longing for it, whether he was a bourgeois or a proletarian."[182]

McKay's disagreement with the proletarian poets concerns at one and the same time the class content of revolutionary aesthetics and the nature of literary production itself. In defending the peasant poet from his radical detractors, McKay is not advancing the peasant as an alternative revolutionary subject to the proletarian, nor is he arguing for a "rural" avant-garde. Indeed, McKay's discomfort arises not so much from the absence of peasant representation as from the proletarian poets' assumption that one's attachment to the countryside is subject to rational control and re-direction. Notably, McKay makes recourse to "nature" in his defense of rural nostalgia, thus invoking the Romantic tradition in which the countryside forms a privileged site

[181] Ibid., 145.

[182] Ibid.

for the cultivation of "natural feeling." It is in the condition of "Low and rustic life," wrote Wordsworth in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."[183] McKay's invocation of these "natural" passions to defend a "peasant-become-proletarian" poet in Moscow's Arbat club suggests a new globalized permutation of what Raymond Williams called the Romantics' "green language": "A way of seeing has been connected with a lost phase of living, and the association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a whole convention, in which not only innocence and security but peace and plenty have been imprinted, indelibly, first on a particular landscape, and then, in a powerful extension, on a particular period of the rural past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relations and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, Nature."[184] The Russian poet's soft threne echoes this Romantic idealization of a vanishing rural world, revealing the enduring emotional currency of the countryside in a post-WWI moment of global revolutionary upheaval. The Romantic response to rural dispossession is thus repeated on a global scale at the precise moment when Romanticism would seem to have been superseded by a novel revolutionary modernism. This return of the repressed countryside does not take the form of a codifiable doctrine or agenda, however, but instead manifests as an elemental "natural" force, exorbitant to authorial intention and unresponsive to political prescription. McKay's romanticism is "unreconstructed" and asserts itself as such, assigning value precisely to that which has already formed creative consciousness rather than that consciousness' own formative capacity. McKay thus appears in this scene less as

[183] William Wordsworth et al., *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, Broadview Editions (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008).

[184] Williams, *The Country and the City,* 127.

the proponent of some countervailing politico-aesthetic tendency to proletarian literature then as the defender of the Wordsworthean idea of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,";[185] what needs preservation, McKay insists, is not only the countryside itself but a notion of poetic creation as that which cannot be programmed in advance.

Yet this is a paradoxical protest, for while it seems on one hand to assert the prerogative of the individual artist over the revolutionary collective, the individuation of the lyric subject in this scene appears as a constitutively social and, indeed, global process, dependent as it is upon the intimate resonance of "rural" experience across the borders of nationality and language; and, while it appears, on one hand, as a defense of creative freedom against the constraints of proletarian doctrine, this argument for literary creation as "natural expression" justifies an apparent absence of revolutionary content on the basis of the author's heteronomous conditioning by external historical forces and affective compulsions. Here, in the epicenter of global proletarian culture, McKay confronts the contradictions of peasant agency in displaced form. In "Peasants Ways O' Thinking" the process of proletarianization was not named as such, but appeared only as a temporary compromise made for the sake of peasant survival. In Moscow, the material transition has occurred, but consciousness has not kept pace: McKay in this moment refuses to locate the conditions of agential self-expression within a proletarian subject position that he nonetheless formally identifies with. McKay and his Russian comrade have been proletarianized, but their proletarianization does not, as they see it, form the condition of their literary emancipation. The "peasants-become-proletarians" defend their common sense of individuality as the free expression of a heteronomy: They, in other words, assert the shared prerogative to feel unfree, to see themselves, not as liberated, but as dispossessed by the

[185] Wordsworth, Preface, 175.

historical process of proletarianization that others in the club view as the driving force of world revolution.

It is, interestingly, unclear whether McKay and his Russian comrade considered their ongoing investment in the rural as necessitating a break from proletarian literature as such. McKay's commitment to Marxist politics and aesthetics has been, as we have seen, extensively debated. Gary Holcomb might point out that McKay's highlighting of the Arbat scene in his autobiography was part of that text's "anticommunist whiteout," of a piece with the poet's late-career effort to disavow radicalism and placate the FBI.[186] McKay's protest in the scene is, indeed, difficult to reconcile with the many statements of support for and identification with proletarian struggle that appear throughout his writings. There is no denying the centrality of the urban Black working class to McKay's aesthetics, although the proletarian influence is more palpable in his novels. McKay seems anything but nostalgic when recounting his stint as a server on a Pennsylvania Railroad Dining Car in a 1932 article for the *New York Herald Tribune*:

It was not until I was forced down among the rough body of the great serving class of Negroes that I got to know my Aframerica. I was perhaps then as the most impressionable adult age and the warm contact with my workmates, boys and girls, their spontaneous ways of acting on and living for the moment, the physical and sensuous delights, the loose freedom in contrast to the definite peasant pattern by which I had been raised—all served to feed the riotous sentiments smoldering in me and cut me finally adrift from the fixed moorings my mind had been led to respect but to which my heard had never held.[187]

Here, in contrast to the assertion of rural identity in the Arbat club, McKay defines the rural past as a constraint, a "definite peasant pattern" that conditioned his "mind" but never claimed his "heart" and from which he has finally "cut adrift" by urban African American workers. It is clear, then, that McKay's reservations about the proletarian arts movement did not necessarily

[186] Holcomb, *Code Name Sasha*, 20.

[187] Claude McKay, "A Negro to his Critics," *New York Herald Tribune* (March 6, 1932).

imply any sense of discomfort or alienation from the Black working classes themselves. McKay's critique of proletarian doctrine also led him, in what would appear precisely the opposite direction of rural nostalgia, towards what Brent Hayes Edwards calls a "vagabond internationalism" that valorized the wandering and dispossessed Black *lumpen* proletariat at the margins of capitalist development.[188] The unreconstructed ruralism that manifests in McKay's defense of the Russian poet should therefore not be taken as reflecting a stable or fully elaborated political stance. Neither, however, should it be discounted simply as a temporary retrogression or capitulation to counter-revolutionary power: For, as any reader of *Harlem Shadows* will attest, the strain of rural longing is no less central to McKay's poetry than his revolutionary, working class, and "vagabond internationalist" tendencies. The critical challenge, then, is to account for the surprising coexistence of McKay's "soft threne" with his admiration for the "loose freedom" of an expanding Black working class. What requires explication, more specifically, are the apparently contradictory notions of literary freedom implied by this coexistence: How does McKay navigate between the "natural expression" of rural longing and the riotous sentiments of the proletariat? At what point does the former becomes a "definite pattern" that must be broken to allow the free flow of modernist expression and when does the latter become a straitjacket that inhibits the lamentation of rural dispossession?

Critics have traditionally responded in one of two ways to the rural-urban tension in McKay's Standard English poetry. On one hand, this duality has been assimilated into a conventional division between McKay's "propagandic" and "lyrical" tendencies. As William Stanley Braithwaite observed in an essay for Alain Locke's movement-defining anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, McKay's work "is caught between the currents of the poetry of

[188] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 187.

protest and the poetry of expression; he is in turn the violent and strident propagandist, using his poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts, and then the pure lyric dreamer, contemplating life and nature with a wistful sympathetic passion."[189] On the other hand, that McKay could in one place assert the importance of his peasant background to his poetic identity and in another disavow this background as a fetter inhibiting his creative development would seem to lend credence to the common complaint that McKay simply had no coherent account of his craft. McKay, observed Ralph Ellison, was frustratingly "inarticulate when it came to discussing his technique."[190] Isn't McKay's reversion from working class radicalism to rural nostalgia simply another manifestation of his "weak-kneed, nonpolitical, non-committal naivete," his unreconstructed romanticism the sign of his "meek reverence for the poetic cliches of someone else's bygone century"?[191]

As we have seen, the chorus of complaints about the failure of McKay's authorial agency actually make mutually contradictory claims about where McKay's radicalism ends and his "meek reverence" begins, which only serves to highlight the enduring salience of the social fissures underwriting his politico-aesthetic irresolution. Indeed, the "half-baked" modernity of McKay's verse was, as sociologists observed, mirrored in the contemporaneous trends of Northern Black class formation. In his contribution to Locke's anthology, Charles S. Johnson describes the growing ranks of the urban Black proletariat as a disorganized mass whose forms of political organization and cultural consciousness reveal the structural incompleteness of Black adjustment to urban life. The "new frontier of Negro life," he observes, "is flung out in a jagged,

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[189] William Stanley Brathwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in *The New Negro*, 40.

[190] Ralph Ellison, Interview with Ishmael Reed, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, edited by Maryema Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 342-377.

[191] See Harold Cruse, *Crisis*, 51 and Maxwell, Introduction to *CP*, xx"xi.

uneven but progressive pattern."[192] Exploited as a cheap reserve pool of labor, blocked from joining unions, and still under the grip of old prejudices and traditions, Black émigrés from the South "drift, a disorganized mass, self-conscious, but with their aims unrationalized, into the face of new problems."[193] Johnson notes: "By tradition and probably by temperament the Negro is a rural type. His metier is agriculture. To this economy his mental and social habits have been adjusted."[194] To reorganize the Black masses along industrial lines, workers in the cities require "a new leadership, training in the principles of collective action, a new orientation with their white fellow workers for the sake of a future peace, a reorganization of the physical and mental habits which are a legacy of their old experiences, and deliberate training, for the new work to come."[195]

Johnson's account of urban Black disorganization suggests that McKay's unreconstructed ruralism was, rather than a mere retreat into lyrical self-isolation, part and parcel of the larger dynamics of Black class formation in the 1920s. At the same time, in calling for a new regime of Black industrial reeducation to erase vestigial Southern "mental habits," Johnson exemplifies a form of modernist sociological reason that serves as an illustrative foil for McKay's distinctive experiments in proletarian aesthetics. Johnson, an acolyte and important innovator of the novel 1920s sociological subfield of "race relations," is rather vague in articulating the politico-economic *ends* of urban Black class formation.[196] Johnson wants the racial integration of unions, to be sure, but this immediate goal is itself ambiguously framed by a notion of industrial progress

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[192] Charles S. Johnson, "The New Frontage of American Life," in *The New Negro*, 297.
[193] Ibid., 293.

[194] Ibid., 279.

[195] Ibid., 294.

[196] See Patrick J. Gilpin, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.)

as preparation for "the work to come." He wants to solve the "problems" of urban life and even to encourage Black workers towards collective "action" but these problems and these actions remain unspecified, deferred to a future "frontier" of urban development. Johnson's call for new leadership that can discipline and rationalize the urban Black masses is not a program of class struggle, but one of "adjustment," and, while he celebrates the dawning of a new Black social consciousness, he also calls the for the resolution of those conflicts that would appear to impede the harmonization of Black industrial labor with the broader imperatives of "progress," whatever those may be.

Moreover, the ambiguities of Johnson's industrial progressivism are not without their corollaries in interwar Marxism. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels famously declared that the global bourgeoisie had "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life."[197] On the basis of this confidence in the progressive character of bourgeoisie-led modernization, notes Williams, "a major distortion in the history of communism was erected…If the forms of bourgeoisie development contained, with whatever contradiction, values higher than 'rural idiocy' or 'barbarism,' then almost any program, in the name of the urban proletariat, could be justified and imposed."[198] During the Fourth Congress of the International that McKay attended, Soviet leadership were promoting the New Economic Policy as a transitional stage between private and collective agricultural production. Lenin spoke of the need to win the peasants' confidence before transitioning to communal farms: "And up to that time we are not their teachers but their pupils."[199] Lenin's warnings against the expropriation of

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[197] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1848), 17.

[198] Williams, *The Country and The City*, 303.

[199] Qtd. in C.L.R. James, *World Revolution: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, ed. Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017), 301.

the peasantry, his assertion of the imperative to "take account of the special conditions of their lives, to learn from themselves the methods that may lead them to a better social order," were ultimately abandoned in Stalin's policy of forced collectivization. With this pivot to the coercive development of agricultural production, the Soviet Union enacted "one of the most terrible phases in the whole history of rural society."[200]

The subordination of the countryside was therefore a pivotal moment in both liberal-capitalist and state socialist visions of economic development, whatever important political differences existed between their respective conceptions of "progress" and the rationalizations made on their behalf. McKay's poetic investment in the countryside was not rooted in any elaborate theoretical account of peasant economy or the broader Marxist transition debates of the 1920s. Nonetheless, the struggle that unfolds in the Arbat club echoes the dilemmas of agricultural development foregrounded in the Soviet Union's New Economic Policy. In both, the countryside (whether real or imagined) manifests models of self-contained "organicity" that administrators must contend with, either as a source of knowledge whose internalization might facilitate the transition to socialism, or as vestigial fetters to be abolished so as to expedite that transition. The implications of rural policy in both literature and economics therefore went beyond the fate of the peasantry to touch on a core dilemma of revolutionary society. Lenin's assertion that Soviet leadership must serve as the "pupils" of the peasantry on the path to collectivization expressed what C.L.R. James described as his all-important faith in the "creative capacity of the masses."[201] Stalin's forced collectivization of the peasantry, by contrast, augured

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[200] Williams, *The Country and the City*, 303.

[201] James, *World Revolution*, 111 and James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1950), 115.

what James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee would later call the "control in social production of the administrative elite over the masses."[202] When considered in the light of the later distortions and contradictions produced by Stalinist vanguardism, McKay's protest looks rather ambiguous: On one hand, it reveals ambivalence about the "world-moving social shake-up" of revolution itself; on the other, it may be read as a warning against a rigid vanguardist dogma that "suppress[es] and crush[es] what is always required for the building of a new society, the powers and energies of those who have to build it."[203]

McKay' unreconstructed ruralism, I want to suggest, is reducible neither to a purely individual nostalgia nor to a weak-kneed indecisiveness. The turn from revolutionary optimism to rural nostalgia, to be sure, risks idealizing and individualizing the memory of a colonial agricultural economy that, as McKay is well aware, contains its own contradictions. Yet it is equally important to note that McKay's impassioned protest in the Arbat club is triggered, not by an individual upswelling of rural memory, but by the realization that his feelings of displacement and alienation are shared by another "peasant-become-proletarian" from across the world. What is at stake in McKay's defense of his Russian compatriot is thus not a purely individual nostalgia, but an affective common space in which the memory of geographically dispersed country-sides echo and harmonize in dialogic relation. This is a paradoxical and precarious form of lyric sociality, rooted not it an establishes set of common political aims but rather in a furtively shared sense of belonging to places that are, by definition, inaccessible. There is a dynamic of transcultural communication at play here that is materially dependent on the institutional infrastructure of proletarian culture—McKay would not have heard the Russian poet

[202] James et al, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, 115.

[203] Johnson et al., Preface to *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, xxxiii.

if not for the gathering in the Arbat club—but also exorbitant to its official protocols of exchange. The resonance of the soft threne bypasses the hegemonic form of working-class ideology, producing a poetic commons "in" but not "of" the proletarian avant-garde. The global countryside appears in this scene as the foundation of a shared cultural metalanguage that does not require, and in fact actively resists, *mediation* (note how McKay's translator becomes irrelevant) through the proletarian master code that attempts to guide poetic expression towards a revolutionary telos.

The contradictions of official proletarian culture are mirrored and inverted in McKay's reactions against them. Throughout McKay's Standard English poetry, the "country" functions, not only as a geographic space, but as a symbolic placeholder for the "unrationalized aims" that appear to both capitalist and socialist modernizers as an impediment to the forward march of progress. McKay's defense of rural anachronism can be read in this vein as a critique, not only of the radical poets' reflexive privileging of city over country, but of a proletarian vanguard that transforms "revolution" into a cudgel with which to discipline the creative expression of the proletariat themselves. What McKay rejects, in other words, is a notion of proletarian form as a practice of rationalization and reeducation, a politico-aesthetic doctrine that defines the rural as obsolete and the obsolescent as an aberration. This vanguardist ideal of cultural mastery, already evident in the Arbat club, was later codified in Stalin's designation of proletarian writers as "engineers of human souls."[204] At the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress A.A. Zdhanov provided an exposition of the phrase: "To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of

[204] A. A. Zdhanov, "Soviet Literature: Richest in Ideas, Most Advanced Literature," in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism*, transcribed by Jose Braz, Andy Blunden (Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zdhanov.htm

the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams."[205] Zdhanov and Stalin's notion of the radical writer as an engineer of human souls is the apotheosis of proletarian rationalism. In positioning the interior subjectivity of the reader as an object of cultural engineering, this analogy promises to abolish bourgeois society's division of leisure/labor, art/science, individual interiority/rational instrumentality. Yet to overcome the division between idealist utopian fantasy and the practical struggles of real life, Zdhanov himself entrenches a stark division of labor between a rational and progressive intellectual elite and a passive romantic readership. As C.L.R. James would likely observe, this analogy of writers to engineers also suggests the transformation of proletarian literature from a direct expression of the creative energies of the people themselves into an administrative cultural apparatus directly instrumental for Soviet state planning. It is an apt metaphor for an administrative-bureaucratic and vanguardist conception of cultural producers, mirroring the Stalinist notion of party leadership as an "elite leading backwards workers."[206] In keeping with rationalism's bourgeois origins, Zhdanov's program of literary engineering "does not and cannot doubt that harmonious progress is inevitable" if the masses are guided by "the business-like and practical spirit" of conscious planning. Yet Zhdanov reproduces the very "materialist"-"idealist" antinomy he seeks to overcome by subordinating the soul of the masses to the mind of the writers. This program of Soviet realism attempts to sever proletarian form's organic relation to the dialectically unfolding struggles of the working class, defining the former instead as an instrument with which to organize and direct the latter. By redefining radical literature as an

[205] Ibid.

[206] James et al., *State and Revolution*, 55.

external force that mechanically guides and directs historical progress, the realist program thus reinstates "uncritical materialism and uncritical idealism."[207]

From the upheavals of 1919 through the late 1920s, McKay's aesthetic practice develops in opposition to this vanguardist notion of proletarian literature as the engineering of human souls. Indeed, conceiving McKay's antagonist as doctrinaire rationalist vanguardism, rather than the proletariat as a class, helps explain the paradoxical co-presence of the two apparently opposed strains of his poetics. Ruralism and riotous Black urbanity intersect at the crossroads of McKay's allergy to the prescriptions of an "advanced" administrative cultural elite. McKay mobilizes the "riotous sentiments" of the nascent Black working classes *and* their "natural" expression of rural longing against all that is rigid, forced and mechanical in the efforts of a progressive vanguard to impose organization and "direction" from above. Pitting himself against both liberal and socialist schemes of progressive development, McKay champions the "drifting, disorganized, unrationalized" masses; he seeks, not to redirect their movements towards "progress," but to discover literary forms adequate to their wayward thoughts and feelings, even and especially when these appear anachronistic and out-of-place. If the Stalinist idea of cultural engineering seeks to impose proletarian form on the "backwards" masses, McKay promulgates an idea of Black aesthetic innovation as an outgrowth of the consciousness and self-activity of its subjects. What McKay sacrifices in revolutionary guidance he gains in the retention of a dynamic relation between form and subject. McKay's desire to maintain the aesthetic sovereignty of the Black masses leads him so far as to apparently negate his own authority as a formal mediator, an effort that culminates in the "plotless" novel *Banjo*. This novel was among other things McKay's self-conscious effort to revitalize proletarian aesthetics by breaking loose

[207] Ibid., 116.

of the movement's deadening formulaic rationalism. Ray, a stand-in for McKay, proclaims his admiration for "the black boys' unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones."[208] (321). This celebration of the "unconscious artistic capacity" of the Black masses serves as the basis for the novel's critique of elitist vanguardism. McKay's counter-manifesto to the "engineer of human souls" concept appears in the final pages:

> The more Ray mixed in the rude anarchy of the lives of the black boys—loafing, singing, bumming, playing, dancing, loving, working—and came to a realization of how close-linked he was to them in spirit, the more he felt that they represented more than he or the cultured minority the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race. And the thought kept him wondering how that race would fare under the ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life.[209]

Here an organicist notion of racial vitality overtakes and revalorizes what progressive modernizers of multiple political stripes would describe as the aimless and disorganized "mental habits" of drifting Black proletarians. McKay's vision of spiritual communion between author and subject inverts the dualist mind/soul hierarchy of rationalist proletarian vanguardism. The story of *Banjo* is, among other things, the story of the author relinquishing authority; the plotless form of the novel can thus be understood as the product of that act of abdication and, by extension, an attempt to undo the progressive temporal schema imposed by the "ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life."

The urban cosmopolitan vagabondage of *Banjo* might look a far cry from the soft threne of rural nostalgia in the Arbat club. Yet the musical instrument that gives the novel its name and forms the centerpiece of the vagabonds' orchestra is a product, not of the Northern metropolis, but of generations of Black creative resistance and adaptation in the plantation economies of the

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[208] McKay, *Banjo*, 321.

[209] Ibid., 324.

Americas.[210] The drifters of Marseilles tell jokes and relate the folktales learned in their childhoods in the Caribbean, Africa and the U.S. South.[211] McKay's impressionistic depictions of a riotous and seedy Marseilles nightlife fade almost indiscernibly into memories of home. When Ray joins Latnah for dinner in her chamber, their tryst sparks a tropical reverie: "Dark brown bodies of the earth, earthy…Ray's hankering was for scenes of tropical shores sifted through hectic years…Oh, the tropical heat of earth and body glowing in the same rhythm of nature…sun-hot warmth wilting the blood-bright hibiscus, drawing the thick creaminess out of the lush bell-flowers, burning green fields and pasture lands to crispy autumn color, and driving the brown doves and pea doves to cover cooing under the fan-broad cooling woodland leaves."[212] A primitivist organicism that locates racial vitality in the physical movements of the body here transitions, through a kind of natural chain of association, into a recollective mood that combines nostalgia for a lost landscape with a more erotic and fiercely urgent sense of longing. McKay's celebration of racial "rootedness" narrows, through a concretization of the primitivist metaphor of "earth," into the memory of a particular Caribbean ecology. This telescoping from the metaphoric to the literal "earth" creates a certain tonal ambivalence, for while the initial function of that metaphor was to suggest a sense of racial belonging in the space of Latnah's chamber, the move towards an individual memory of a particularized Caribbean landscape would seem to undermine that shared sense of sensuous immediacy. These tensions between collective racial and individual geographic "roots" are not resolved but exposed as a dialectic immanent to Black diasporic relationality. Alienation from the space they share does not only separate Latnah

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[210] See Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*(Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.)

[211] See McKay, *Banjo*, 114, 117

[212] Ibid., 283-284.

and Ray from each other but forms the very emotional substance of their intimate connection. Their alienation and longing for elsewhere *is* what they share: The memories that pull them away from the sensuous immediacy of the present also concretize a common diasporic history of migration and dispossession.

This sociality of common alienation is part of what McKay seeks to designate with the moniker "vagabond," a term that nicely captures McKay's heterodox approach to proletarian aesthetics. On one hand, as Brent Hayes Edwards observes, McKay adopts this term to signify an ethos of cosmopolitan itinerancy and restless movement. Yet the figure of the "vagabond" also suggests a complex interplay between a notion of consciously willed migration and movement that is compelled or coerced by an external force. Edwards points to McKay's statement of self-willed vagabondage in his autobiography-- "I became a vagabond—but a vagabond with a purpose"—and argues that his use of the term in *Banjo* "must be understood in this light…[as] as the vibrant resistance of the black boys to the forces that would contain them."[213] Yet McKay's autobiographical qualification "with a purpose" also indicates an awareness that, left on its own, the term evokes a sense of purposelessness, passivity, even indolence. Elsewhere McKay's usage of the term hovers ambiguously between a notion of movement "with a purpose" and something closer to a Schopenhauerian sense of submission to a blind and unaccountable will. In a letter to Harold Jackman McKay defines his "vagabond soul" as an "outlaw soul that cannot reconcile itself to the fact of limitation to any one country or allegiance to any one nation."[214] To be possessed of a vagabond soul, on this account, is to be the subject of a non-sovereign freedom, unable to reconcile oneself to geographic constraint. Moreover, by conjuring the figure of the

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[213] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 206.

[214] McKay qtd. In Maxwell, Intro to *CP,* xi.

outlaw, McKay reveals his awareness that the excessive mobility of the vagabond is itself subject to the discipline and control of a penal apparatus. Indeed, as Edwards observes, the term vagabond "first appears in Banjo not in a proclamation of irresponsibility or bohemian excess, but as a term imposed by the authorities in an attempt to deport the black drifter with the 'long-term record of existence on the beach.'"[215] The connotations of vagabond in the text are, to be sure, not exhausted by its disciplinary function. That the term appears first within the context of a failed deportation attempt, however, alerts us to its designation of a vagrant sociality that is, as Fred Moten might put it, "fully and problematically before the law."[216] The vagabond is "before the law" in the sense that it is a backward projection of freedom at the point of its containment. Ginger's "long-term record of existence on the beach" is only belatedly recognized as "vagabondage" when that existence is criminalized, so that when Banjo and Malty and all the others arrive in the port and self-consciously adopt an ethos of vagabondage they are inhabiting a freedom immanently anterior to Ginger's incarceration and prefatory to his deferred deportation.[217] What they do with that freedom, famously, is "loaf," "sing," "bum," and "drift" around the port until they are finally deported or forced out, finally fulfilling the promise of Ginger's writ of expulsion. These are acts of "vibrant resistance," to be sure, but their appearance as resistance is conditional on the state's belated criminalization of Ginger's "long-term existence." The temporal structure of emancipation evoked in the idea of the vagabond is not progressive but retroactive. It is not the vanguard's conscious carrying out of a plan but a collective turning back and redefining as resistance was before was mere existence. The

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[215] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 203.

[216] Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, Consent Not to Be a Single Being, v. 2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 116.

[217] McKay, *Banjo*, 5.

resistance of the vagabond thus resonates with the patterns of belated recuperation and revalorization that shape Black radicalism, in the words of Cedric Robinson, as a tradition that "cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis."[218]

The freewheeling vagabondage of *Banjo* is also recursive in another sense. For this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that the criminalization of Black vagrancy appears as a theme in McKay's writing. As McKay reveals in his *Constab Ballads* and in his 1932 short story "When I Pounded the Pavement," the compulsion to enforce colonial vagrancy law in Kingston and subsequent realization that he felt "a most improper sympathy with wrongdoers" was pivotal to the whole confluence of philosophical pessimism and moral-politico identification with the oppressed peasantry that defined his early articulation of poetic identity.[219] McKay's revulsion towards the criminalization of Black vagrant sociality is the primal scene of his career, displaced and reiterated in Ray's mediations at the end of *Banjo*: Just as the harsh discipline of the constabulary prompts the younger McKay's poetic "return to the soil," the deportation of the vagabonds of Marseilles incites Ray's primitivist tirade against the "civilized machine" of modernity that culminates with his reestablishment of "contact with racial roots."[220] In the novel's closing pages, Ray relates the dissolution of the vagabond commons to a longer historical cycle of imperial expropriation and containment: "For civilization had gone out among these native, earthy people, had despoiled them of their primitive soil, had uprooted, enchained, transported, and transformed them to labor under its laws, and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate

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[218]Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.

[219] McKay, "When I Pounded the Pavement," in Gingertown (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

[220] McKay, Preface to *Constab Ballads* in CP, 295 and *Banjo*, 313-326.

them within its walls."[221] White civilization's intolerance of Black vagabondage is here critiqued, not only as a contemporary manifestation of nationalist bigotry, but as a disavowal of the imperial destruction and despoilation that itself forced the vagabonds "within the walls" of Western nations. McKay in this passage clarifies the political logic that underwrites the novel's seemingly paradoxical combination of cosmopolitan internationalism and racial primitivism. The vagabonds' uprooting of the nation is simultaneously an imaginative re-rooting in organicist notions of "natural," "earthy" "unself-conscious" sociality that, according to Ray, trace all the way back to their original "primitive soil." Vagabond internationalism and racial primitivism, while they seem to point in opposed spatial and temporal directions (globalized modernity on one hand, prelapsarian nature on the other), are both rejections of the "mechanical organization" of modern life. Vagabondage recuperates the "unrationalized" consciousness of Black migrants who are simultaneously dispossessed from their native soil and refused a place within the walls of "civilized" modernity; this ethos promises at once to reestablish an organic connection with the "roots" of racial consciousness and to transmute those roots into the foundation of a mobility that exceeds and transcends the "mechanical" global system of sovereign states and borders.

In *Banjo*, then, the tension between McKay's ruralism and his riotous urbanity would seem to be resolved through a sublation of values previously associated with "the country" into primitivist racial organicism. The plotless novel, which became a key influence on Léopold Senghor and the *Négritude* movement, has enshrined McKay's place as a progenitor of Black aesthetic decolonization.[222] Yet the *Banjo*'s turn to the "deep reserves" of racial roots also represents a crucial rearticulation of tendencies that had long been central even to the more

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[221] McKay, *Banjo,* 314.

[222] See Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora* , 187.

apparently staid and stately side of McKay's corpus.[223] Indeed, it is worth asking whether "Spring in New Hampshire," a poem translated and published in *La Revue du monde noir* while excerpts from *Banjo* were circulating in *Légitime Défense*, can be understood, despite its quaint pastoral lyricism, as registering cultural impulses continuous with the *Negritude* movement.[224] Though it makes no reference to "racial roots," the speaker's desire for escape from the drudgery of the workday into a revitalizing nature is broadly consonant with the primitivist critique of modernity's "mechanical organization." The poem captures the fleeting thoughts of a domestic "Wasting the golden hours indoors,/ Washing windows and scrubbing floors" as they yearn for the "springing April grass" and the "silver-speckled sky."[225] The poem expresses a vagabondesque desire for uncontained movement and, like the drifters of Marseilles, represents this impulse as an abstraction of "nature." While in *Banjo* Ray's memory of the Caribbean landscape is metaphorized and internalized through his search for racial "roots," however, in "Spring in New Hampshire" McKay projects the interior subjectivity of the worker onto an externalized nature through an—admittedly, rather hackneyed—pathetic fallacy. The speaker cannot remain indoors, they protest, "While happy winds go laughing by." If the pastoral of "Spring in New Hampshire" appears out-of-sync with McKay's aesthetic radicalism, then, its limits arise not from the failure to express an emancipatory desire, but rather from how that expression itself falls back on a bland (we might even say "mechanical") lyric convention.

However we assess the aesthetic merit of "Spring in New Hampshire," the poem's use of pastoral tropes to represent a menial workers' desire for spiritual freedom suggest a complex

[223] Léopold Senghor, qtd. in Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 188.

[224] For this publication history see Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 187.

[225] McKay, "Spring in New Hampshire," *CP*, 171.

effort to transform conventions associated with rural life themselves into a strategy of poetic emancipation in the North. Indeed, if McKay's soft threne of rural nostalgia and his riotous proletarian sentiments might seem to designate mutually contradictory politico-aesthetic tendencies, much of his U.S. poetry is poised ambiguously between these two poles. Though in his article for *The Tribune* McKay contrasts the loose freedom of urban Black workers to "the definite peasant pattern" by which he had been raised, *Harlem Shadows*, a collection that helped to inaugurate the Harlem Renaissance, significantly troubles this rural-urban binary. In a short preface to collection following Max Eastman's introduction, McKay foregrounds his Jamaican peasant background as an actively formative influence on his craft. "The speech of my childhood and early youth was the Jamaica Negro dialect," McKay writes, "which still preserves a few words of African origin, and which is more difficult of understanding than the American Negro dialect."[226] Although the teachers of the native elementary schools "were tutored by men and women of British import," McKay recalls "making up verses in the dialect and in English for our moonlight ring dances and for our school parties."[227] Despite his transition from dialect to Standard English, moreover, McKay suggests that a displaced process of Jamaican linguistic creolization remains operative in his compositional practice: "Of our purely native songs the jammas (field and road), shay-shays (yard and booth), wakes (post-mortem), Ananacy tales (transplanted African folklore), 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."[228] McKay thus describes Jamaican prosody, not as a "definite peasant pattern" that

[226] McKay, Preface to *Harlem Shadows* in *CP*, 314-315.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid.

artificially constrains the natural longings of his heart, but as “regular forms” that are organically linked to the cultivation of his “poetic thought.” This account of linguistic evolution complicates the idea of a clean break from rural Jamaican tradition in the transition from dialect to standard English. Indeed, McKay’s preface challenges the strict opposition between dialect and traditional English lyric forms that would later underwrite Brathwaite’s critique of McKay as “imprisoned by the pentameter.” Instead of conceiving Jamaican dialect as an authentic linguistic heritage absorbed in isolation from British cultural imperialism, McKay describes “English” and “dialect” co-evolving in appositional proximity and exchange. By emphasizing the entanglement of “Jamaica Negro dialect” and Standard English in his linguistic education, McKay is able to articulate an account of poetic creation in which the “regular forms” of the former condition and regulate adaptations of the latter. Neither “England’s English” nor “Jamaica Negro dialect” are, on this account, simply linguistic straightjackets that impede or obstruct authentic self-expression, but instead are each the source of “forms” that mold and mediate one another. McKay thus counterintuitively introduces his first Standard English collection as the expression of “poetic thought” that is itself a derivation of Jamaican dialect.

McKay’s creolized linguistic heritage turns out, moreover, to have significant ramifications for his thinking about the politics of poetic form. McKay’s preface continues:

> Consequently, although very conscious of the new criticism 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. I have not used patterns, images and words that would stamp me as a classicist nor a modernist. My intellect is not scientific enough to range me on the side of either; nor is my knowledge wide enough for me to specialize in any school.[229]

The account of “traditional” form on offer in this passage contrasts sharply with the later account of a “definite peasant pattern” that constraints “riotous sentiments smoldering in me.” If, in the

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[229] Ibid., 315.

essay for the *Tribune*, the old forms are "fixed moorings my mind had been led to respect but to which my heart had never held," here McKay describes a more dynamic process of formal adaptation and renovation in which "older traditions" are discovered as "adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods." The regular forms, which are themselves the product of a longer history of linguistic creolization in Jamaica, are thus revealed once again as flexible and evolving modes of expression, and indeed as susceptible to remobilization for "revolutionary" ends. McKay's language here is, to be sure, tentative and provisional in a way that might strike us as reflecting indecisiveness. Doesn't the notion that the old forms are merely "adequate" suggest, like the phrase "sufficient expression for their feelings" in *The Negroes in America*, a sense of resignation or even conservative compromise with the prison-house of the pentameter? Such a reading is available, but it would lead us down a path that McKay, I think, wants us to avoid. Black creative expression in the Americas, as McKay emphasize in *The Negroes*, has *always* been a process of adaptation to violently imposed linguistic constraints that necessitate discordant hybridizations and adjustments. To assert an imperative for cultural self-determination external to those constraints can lead, paradoxically, to a re-disciplining of Black speech in the name of a search for unpolluted authenticity. The radical act is not to disavow linguistic constraints that condition Black creative expression but to discover in this fallen linguistic condition forms that are "adequate" for revolutionary expression. This indeed can be understood as the source of McKay's greatness: He did not allow the knowledge that he was in a process of provisional and tentative cultural and linguistic adaptation to prevent him from giving voice to his revolutionary passions.[230] McKay's preface anticipates the later critiques of his

[230] This point echoes David Scott's revisionist account of Toussaint Louverture: "On this reading, Toussaint's greatness consists less in his agency than in the example of his courage in facing up to and acting within the impossible circumstances with which that agency was confronted." Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* 165.

poetry's "form-content schizophrenia" and "half-baked modernity" and accepts them as inevitable, as a basic feature of the treacherous waters one treads as a Black radical poet in the Americas. McKay's preface might look self-deprecating in its attribution of these formal instabilities to his unscientific intellect and lack of "knowledge." However, we might also detect a sly critical undercurrent to these disclaimers that anticipates McKay's critique of rationalist vanguardism. McKay here, in other words, already reveals his awareness that advocates of certain modernist avant-garde tendencies are likely to attack his combination of traditional forms and revolutionary moods as an improper poetic admixture. Sidestepping this disciplinary modernist discourse and its demand for "specialization" in particular schools and tendencies, McKay presents himself instead as a roving dilettante, a medium of politico-poetic articulation and creolization.

The preface to *Harlem Shadows* thus serves as an illustrative companion piece to McKay's account of Black linguistic adaptation in *The Negroes in America*. In the latter, as we have seen, McKay correlates the various regional permutations of Black dialect to historical stages of capitalist development. The temporal simultaneity of proletarian and non-proletarian dialect, as I suggested, creates a difficulty for McKay, complicating his articulation of a politico-aesthetic program for Black Hemispheric American writing. As we are now positioned to see, moreover, this difficulty is not only linguistic but also politico-economic: While the Jamaican peasantry are undergoing a process of contraction and being forced into ranks of a migratory proletariat, they also still retain a precarious foothold in the autonomous form of production developed in opposition to the plantation system during the post-emancipation period. The contraction of the Jamaican peasantry is a comparatively recent and incomplete historical process, and, indeed, as we have seen, a hybridized "semi-proletarian" class structure will

ultimately turn out to be an enduring feature of Caribbean economic development. In departing Jamaica for the U.S., then, McKay does not by extension transition from a "peasant" to a "proletarian" period of Caribbean writing, even if such a transition has indeed occurred within the U.S. itself. In the preface to *Harlem Shadows* McKay attempts to confront the unresolved tensions of his chapter in *The Negroes in Americas*. If in the chapter on the "Negroes in Literature" McKay acknowledges the discrepancies of Hemispheric American class formation, in the preface to *Harlem Shadows* he presents his own compositional practice as a mediation of these discrepancies. We might expect McKay to justify his embrace of Standard English on the basis of the process of linguistic homogenization that, on his account, results from and facilitates the process of urban Black class formation in the U.S. North. Instead, McKay describes his distinctive usage of English as directly informed by his creolized linguistic education in the West Indies. McKay's "poetic thought" continues to run in the "regular forms" produced by "native songs"; even more, he now discovers these forms as "adequate" for expressing his "revolutionary moods." McKay's poetic thought therefore does not follow a unilinear path from rural contentment to urban radicalization. Poetic revolution, on his account, is not the expression of a completed process of class formation but is instead a return to and reanimation of the old "native" traditions. If McKay's "revolutionary moods" allude to a process of modern political radicalization, this emergent radical consciousness takes poetic form, paradoxically, through resistance to literary proletarianization.

How, though, does McKay's unreconstructed rural formalism, rooted in the rhythm and meter of Jamaican jammas, transform into a medium of "lawless and revolutionary passions and moods"? McKay's poetics sets in motion a process of formal creolization that renders the cultural constituents of any given expression difficult to localize. For McKay to say that his

"poetic thought" runs into the "regular forms" of Jamaican songs and oral traditions does not provide us with any simple interpretive procedure whereby to trace the cultural "roots" or genealogical origin of a given poetic expression. It is unclear from McKay's preface whether a consciousness that is formed by the "singular meter and rhyme" of native songs and jammas will in turn echo or reproduce those songs' distinctive prosodic structures. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that these traditions are themselves, as McKay notes, products of transplantation. Have African "rhythms" contributed in some discernible way to the development of McKay's poetic thought? The layered histories of displacement, struggle, and cultural adaption conditioning McKay's poetic expression would seem to have "deposited in [him] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."[231] While such an inventory is equally impossible within the space of this chapter, I want to attend to several moments in *Harlem Shadows* in which McKay's speaker recalls, becomes possessed by, or encounters some phonic trace of "older traditions" and, finally, to draw out the potential implications of these anachronistic encounters for the politics of Caribbean diasporic class formation.

Part of what is at stake in McKay's narrative of a polyglot linguistic education is the idea of the poet as "agent" or bearer of a will.[232] Foreshadowing his exchange with the proletarian poets in Moscow, McKay here describes his poetic consciousness as the "natural" product of the rural environment of his youth. The idea that this environment produced "forms" that continue to regulate poetic expression alludes, in part, to the Wordsworthean "organic sensibility," in which influxes of feeling are modified by thoughts that are themselves the sedimentation of past

[231] Antonio Gramsci , *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 8. pr (New York: International Publ, 1985), 324.

[232] My thinking on the idea of the poetic will is informed by Susan Stewart, "Lyric Possession," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn 1995), 34.

feelings, and so on in an endless cycle.[233] McKay, however, is no simple defender of an organicist Wordsworthean tradition. Wordsworth, for all his investment in "common life," described poetic subjectivity as a self-contained organism, regulating itself according to laws that are modeled on nature. There is a sociality at work in McKay's poetic thought that exceeds and disrupts the romantic idea of the lyric subject as mirror of nature. It isn't the idealized but strangely depopulated Wordsworthean vision of "low and rustic" life that McKay invokes here, but a living social world actively engaged in the production of its own poetic and cultural forms. McKay is in effect, without quite naming it as such, recalling his own previous career as a poet ("I quite remember making up verses in the dialect"), and suggesting that the native songs of the peasantry continue to exert some claim, however indirect, on his poetics. McKay presents his poetic consciousness as sedimented with layers of Black diasporic expressive forms, a palimpsest of sounds and languages that outlast the "soil" in which they originally formed. McKay cannot, like Wordsworth, describe poetic consciousness as an organic germination of the soil of his youth, because the cultural forms that evolved in Jamaica are themselves "inorganic" transplants that reflect violent histories of dispossession and cultural imposition. McKay's sense of poetic tradition is at the same time a consciousness of dispossession. In acknowledging his reliance on old forms as merely "adequate" modes of revolutionary expression McKay tacitly recognizes the heteronomy of those forms, that is, the conditioning of those forms by forces and agents extrinsic to the desires of the diasporic subjects who employ them. Having been thus conditioned externally, they in turn themselves form a condition of Caribbean cultural expression: McKay's account of poetic thought that "runs" into these "regular forms" establishes

[233] Wordsworth., Preface to *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800,* 175.

his formation by dispossession, his status as a vessel of "something scripted in another context."[234]

This consciousness of poetic heteronomy, while an omnipresent theme in *Harlem Shadows*, produces a range of responses from McKay's speakers. There is the aching desire for resettlement in poems such as "I Shall Return," where the speaker projects a dreamlike Caribbean countryside as a site of cultural and spiritual refuge: "I shall return to hear fiddle and fife/Of village dances, dear delicious tune/ That stir the hidden depths of native life,/ Stray melodies of dim remembered runes."[235] Elsewhere this longing for cultural restoration is intertwined with a reflection on a creolized linguistic heritage, as in "Outcast," which focuses on the question of African "retentions" in Black diasporic speech: "For the dim regions whence my fathers came/My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs./ Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;/ My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs…Something in me is lost, forever lost,/Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,/ And I must walk the way of life a ghost/" Here the poet elaborates on the ambiguous theme of linguistic conditioning introduced in the preface. The evocation of language as heritage leads McKay's speaker to draw careful distinctions between various sensory and cognitive faculties. The first quatrain does not convey longing for Africa as the yearning of an integral "I" but instead expresses cultural bereavement through a disjuncture between the subject's constituent "parts." The "spirit" longs but is bondaged by the "body"; the words of Africa are "felt" but never "heard"; the "soul" would sing the songs the mind has forgotten. The poem is a mediation on the diasporic subject's conditioning by cultural forms that remain inaccessible, on being able to "feel" but not "speak" language of one's

[234] Stewart, "Lyric Possession," 34.

[235] McKay, "I Shall Return," *CP* 167.

heritage. The anastrophes of the opening lines, by inverting the standard syntactic order of subject and object, creates the disorienting sense that the lyric subject is "being spoken through" by an unaccountable external agent. The poem itself, then, is meant to be understood as a kind of displaced echo of an irrecuperable past, a speech act "haunted under terms that have outlived their referent."[236] This haunting by an untranslatable language, though, also becomes a site of potentiality, as the poem navigates from the awareness of genealogical antecedence ("the dim regions whence my fathers came") towards a desire for future poetic performance phrased in the subjunctive mood ("my soul would sing forgotten jungle songs"). The poem is thus at once a trace and an intimation, a linguistic portal between "words never heard" and the hypothetical possibility of their re-vocalization.

In some poems McKay's speaker achieves a more direct and enabling communion with their linguistic roots, as in "Heritage," which tracks the transmission of cultural knowledge from an apostrophized past to an immanent act of joyous expression in the present. "Now the dead past seems vividly alive,/ And in this shining moment I can trace,/ Down through the vista of the vanished years,/ Your faun-like form, your fond elusive face."[237] Here the poet engages in a successful and revivifying act of cultural excavation and preservation, translating into recorded language a previously inaccessible heritage. Yet the "you" that the speaker apostrophizes is absented through the very process of this recording: "I cannot praise, for you have passed from praise,/ I have no tinted thoughts to paint you true;/ But I can feel and I can write the word;/ The best of me is but the least of you." In order to reappear as a "word" the apostrophized other must first "pass from praise," fading into a realm of obscurity beyond recorded memory. The act of

[236] Stewart, "Lyric Possession" 34.

[237] McKay, "Heritage," *CP* 166.

cultural repossession thus does not simply preserve, but rather constitutes the past as past. The poem simultaneously celebrates and mourns this act of selection, revealing a pained awareness of "the word's" inadequacy as a representative of its vanishing referent.

A similar frustration with the incommensurability of sign and referent is registered in "O Word I Love To Sing." This time, however, the trouble with the "regular forms" is not that they fail to contain the past but that they are discordant with the speaker's present: "O word I love to sing! Thou art too tender/ For all the passions agitating me; For all my bitterness thou art too tender,/ I cannot pour my red soul into thee…O tender word! O melody so slender!/ O tears of passion saturate with brine,/ O words, unwilling words, ye can not render/ My hatred for the foe of me and mine."[238] McKay's self-criticism here seems broadly aligned with the proletarian poets' attack on the "soft threne" in the Arbat club. Indeed, the speakers' frustration with their inability to pour their "red soul" into "tender" forms directly evokes the disjuncture between outmoded aesthetic proclivity and radical political commitment that has perturbed generations of McKay critics. Yet the simple tender rhyme scheme lilts along in jovial complaisance: McKay's conventional iambic pentameter and perfect rhymes enact the formal constraint the agitated speaker seeks to evade, even as they at the same time become the discordant medium of the same speakers' complaint. Why, we might ask, does McKay not simply scrap the limiting forms and seek something more amenable to his "bitterness" and "hatred"? Yet it wouldn't be quite right to call these forms a mere anachronistic vestige that the speaker wants to but can't shed. It is the word, after all that the speaker "loves to sing"; the poem is part self-criticism then, but part passive-aggressive ode to an aesthetic form that is also an intractable love-object. McKay's attachment to this form marks the limit of his poetic sovereignty. The words, as he puts it, are

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[238] McKay, "O Word I Love to Sing," 182.

“unwilling,” which we can read as referring at once to a property of the words themselves and to the conditions of their poetic expression. The words themselves are unwilling to “render hatred,” that is, and they are also spoken unwillingly. The question, then, is whether the poem itself can be accurately called an expression of “hatred,” of the “red soul” that these words cannot contain: If the speaker is unable not to utter words that are unable to render their passions, does that incapacity not reflect a lack of commitment to the full expression and articulation of those passions? Yet the expression of such frustrated incapacity is also a way of giving nascent, partial form to the speakers’ red soul. The poem thus dramatizes an impasse of politico-poetic mediation in which the form of “tender words” and the content of agitated passion are juxtaposed and sutured in uncomfortable poetic disharmony.

I have, up to this point, been exploring McKay’s struggle with poetic heteronomy as a drama that unfolds within an individuated lyric subject. At the same time, I have attempted to show that this is a paradoxical interiority, insofar as the lyric subject’s confrontation with heteronomy is also the recognition of their conditioning by a mosaic of cultural forms and traditions that evolved in contexts outside of and prior to the scene of the poetic utterance itself. McKay’s frequent apostrophizing and personifying of language, as though “the word” were a living entity with whom his speaker is in dialogue, in this way suggests a frustrated inability to secure the realm of free private interiority that has often been understood as the privileged domain of lyric poetry. What is at stake here then, is not simply a recapitulation of Theodor Adorno’s dialectical observation that such a desire for lyric autonomy is itself constitutively social.[239] McKay’s poems rarely attain anything like an abstracted individuality that can in turn

[239] Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes to Literature* Vol.1, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37-54.

be sublated into universality; they do not "refuse to submit to anything heteronomous and constitute themselves solely in accordance with their own laws."[240] Instead, McKay's lyric "I" is riven and crosscut by a cacophony of voices and forms that speak through, for, and even against the subject's "own" desire. These exteriorized forms are not only the personified "words" and "songs" of the cultural past, moreover, but are also occasionally vocalized by a concrete and particularized subject who is explicitly differentiated from the speaker. In these moments the cacophonous process of cultural interfusion that I have been describing as a "creolization of forms" is displaced from the consciousness of the lyric subject and rendered immanently and materially social. It is here that the question of formal anachronism is more directly posed as a question of "class consciousness" and diasporic political collectivity.

The Pennsylvania Railroad dining car that employed McKay as a server became a crucial site for the writer's early experiments in proletarian aesthetics. It was in the dining car that the loose freedom of the African American working unleashed the riotous sentiments of his soul; it is while working in such a dining car, in the novel *Home to Harlem*, that the Caribbean exile Ray teaches the African American war veteran Jake the history of the Haitian revolution and finds a new calling as a novelist of the Black Diaspora.[241] As we have seen, "If We Must Die," the sonnet that helped to galvanize the New Negro movement during the Red Summer, also was a product of the dining car: As McKay relates in his autobiography, he penned the anthem of Black self-defense while he and his crewmembers were reading news of the race riots that tore across the U.S. at the end of the Great War. In the 1920s, the train became an important symbol

[240] Ibid., 40.

[241] Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, 1st Northeastern University Press ed (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 135.

and vehicle of African American labor struggle. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized by A. Philip Randolph in 1925, was the first African American-led union to receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor.[242] Yet, if the train appears to function in McKay's corpus as a cauldron of Black proletarian radicalization, it is also a space in which the tensions of Black diasporic collectivity are laid bare. In *Home to Harlem* Ray is often overcome by "home thoughts," waxing nostalgic for the tropics and expressing haughty disdain for the African American workers who "claim kinship with him."[243] Not all of McKay's train-centered poems are heroic anthems of Black modernity. Indeed, in "Alfonso, Dressing to Wait a Table," the first and greatest of a cluster of train poems in *Harlem Shadows*, McKay depicts the dining car as a space in which the "old traditions" take hold of workers' hearts, evolving, somewhat surprisingly, into a powerful medium of intercultural Black working-class sociality. The poem's title evokes a moment of preparation for the performative labor of dining car service, a transitional scene that serves to illustrate a disjuncture between "natural" and coerced forms of Black expression:

> Alfonso is a handsome bronze-hued lad
> Of subtly-changing and surprising parts;
> His moods are storms that frighten and make glad,
> His eyes were made to capture women's hearts.
>
> Down in the glory-hole Alfonso sings
> An olden song of wine and clinking glasses
> And riotous rakes; magnificently flings
> Gay kisses to imaginary lasses.
>
> Alfonso's voice of mellow music thrills
> Our swaying forms and steals our hearts with joy;
> And when he soars, his fine falsetto trills

[242] Andrew E. Kersten, and Clarence Lang, *Reframing Randolph : Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

[243] McKay, *Home to Harlem*, 153.

Are rarest notes of gold without alloy.

But, O Alfonso! wherefore do you sing
Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places?
Soon we shall be beset by clamouring
Of hungry and importunate palefaces.[244]

The homoerotic desire that affectively structures this poem hinges in no small part on what it refuses to make intelligible about its primary subject, the erstwhile balladeer Alfonso. The Latinate name, most common in Italian and Spanish, combined with the phenotypic designation "bronze-hued," suggests brown skin and a potential connection to the Hispanic Caribbean (Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, the Puerto Rican-born curator and cultural steward of the Harlem Renaissance, is perhaps not irrelevant to the poem's celebration of mobile Black antiquarianism.) Yet geographic roots and racial classifications are, if not wholly detachable from the poem's idealization of "bronze-hued" male beauty, are also not the speaker's primary concern. The speaker's desire is instead evoked by Alfonso's unpredictable and the protean character, his "subtly-changing and surprising parts." The allure of Alfonso is the allure of racial and geographic liminality, a structure of feeling specific to vehicular and transitory zones of Black proletarian class formation. In addition, however, Alfonso is a figure of temporal liminality: His "Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places" create a feeling of tonal incongruity not unlike the self-conscious anachronisms we've seen in other poems, although in this case the surprise of the "old" is combined with a revelation of cultural alterity, rather than the repetition of a form from the speaker's own mnemonic repertoire. Indeed, we might note an intimate intercultural relay between Alfonso's reckless anachronism and McKay's account of his own "poetic thought": Alfonso's combination of ancient songs and volatile moods emblematizes the form-content discordance that haunts McKay throughout the collection, modeling a creative

[244] McKay, "Alfonso, Dressing to Wait a Table," *CP* 153.

redeployment of old "regular forms" in an itinerant proletarian setting. "Alfonso, Dressing to Wait a Table" itself unevenly metabolizes Alfonso's dream-songs within its own formal structure: Though written in iambic pentameter and following the sixteen-line requirement of a sonnet, the poem contains the stanza breaks and rhyme scheme of a ballad. Like the songs and ballads of McKay's peasant days, "Alfonso" seeks to rescue and record an ephemeral and "unconscious" oral tradition. Yet it is a displaced and we might even say "deconstructed" version of this commitment, as the poem does not reproduce Alfonso's song so much as it depicts the desire elicited by its recitation. "Alfonso" thus paradoxically highlights an emergent structure of Black diasporic working-class sociality by depicting the recirculation and exchange of "ancient" cultural forms.

Is "Alfonso," then, a "proletarian poem"? On one hand, it is decidedly and self-consciously not. For, much as he will in his defense of the soft threne in Moscow, McKay here refuses to rationalize and render "progressive" the antiquated forms that flow from the souls of his fellow workers. Indeed, the speaker of "Alfonso" cannot be a vanguardist proletarian organizer, for he his himself thrilled, his heart "stolen" by Alfonso's mellow music. The latter is a particularly evocative verb within the context of this chapter's investigation, for it marks the speaker, not only as susceptible to the influence of cultural forms external to himself, but as susceptible to appropriation by those forms. A problem of poetic possession is thus registered in McKay's metabolization of oral tradition into poetic form: McKay's speaker must be first be metaphorically stolen by Alfonso's song for McKay to transcribe the memory of that song as a poem. Yet if the verb "steal" seems to evoke specters of Black performance as property, the term's political resonance here is surely inflected by the "importunate palefaces" waiting for Alfonso's service outside the glory-hole. What Alfonso's song offers, in other words, is a way of

temporarily stealing back what has already been stolen, repossessing a Black poetic sociality that will soon be appropriated once again by the demands of white customers. The idea of Black poetic emancipation as collective self-dispossession—"stealing our hearts with joy"—thus neither simply rejects nor embodies the project of proletarian literature but registers a tension immanent the literary-historical process wherein the proletariat is reconceptualized as a locus of cultural agency. There is, it must be added, a productive ambiguity in McKay's use of "steal": His grammatical usage of the term, combined with his analogy of Alfonso's song to "gold without alloy," suggests that he might have in mind the verb to "steel," as in overlay or sharpen with metal. This is a notion of stealing not as taking away but as augmenting, fortifying, even preparing for some heroic battle.

Is there not a way then, that we could view Alfonso and the speakers' swaying forms as the poetic apotheosis of class struggle? Might not the incongruence between Alfonso's mellow song and the importunate palefaces serve to "heighten the contradiction" between labor and capital, with potentially riotous or revolutionary consequences? The speakers' final question "Wherefore do you sing…" asks us to identify a purpose for Alfonso's song. We might extend the question: To what political ends do non-proletarian cultural forms appear as a modality of Black working-class representation? This is a question, I have attempted to show, to which McKay's corpus gives multiple answers. The various possibilities, if they contain their own tensions and contradictions, cannot be reduced to a merely individual nostalgic attachment to a residual historical stage. Indeed, we can also detect the glimmer of multiple radical futures in the "resistant previousness" of McKay's poetic forms.[245] In the 1930s Black Labor Internationalists

[245] Fred Moten, "A Resistant Previousness (Back to Living Again)," *Jazz and Culture* Vol.1 (2018), 6-11.

will ask an inverted form of McKay's question: How can "proletarian" forms be modified and adapted to represent the struggles of nonproletarian peoples?

# Chapter 3: "An International Fighting Organization": George Padmore and the Black Toilers' International

The January 1930 edition of *The Negro Worker*, the main publication of the COMINTERN's recently founded International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), opens with a dramatic "Appeal to Negro Workers of the World." The address is penned by the Black Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore, serving now as the paper's editor. In it, Padmore announces that "The most historic gathering of Negro workers will take place in London, on June 1st, 1930, on the occasion when the first Conference called by the Provisional International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers will convene for the purpose of organizing a permanent international movement among the toiling Negro masses of the world." The aim of the conference, Padmore continues,

> …is to create an international fighting organization for a united and organized struggle against imperialist oppression. The rising wave of rebellion among the Negro masses throughout the world, so sharply manifested in the militant action of the Haitian workers, will occupy the closest attention of the conferences. It will discuss all the vital problems of the Negro masses who are brutally exploited, and subjected to every shade of masked slavery by predatory capitalists in Africa, the West Indies, South and North America.[1]

This event is indeed historic, for it marks the beginning of the COMINTERN's first and only effort to organize a Black international labor movement. Previously, as Bill Dunne and J.W. Ford explained in the first installment of *The Negro Worker*, the "question of Negro workers…has usually centered around isolated localities…with very little if any attention given to a broader aspect—a world outlook."[2] The failure of the national parties to channel the revolutionary potential of the global Black masses, however, clearly demonstrated the necessity for such an

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[1] George Padmore, "An Appeal to Negro Workers of the World," *The Negro Worker* Vol 3, No.1 (January-February, 1930), 1.

[2] Bill Dunne and J.W. Ford, "The Organization of an International Negro Trade Union Bureau by the RILU," *The Negro Worker* Vol.1, No.2 (August-September, 1928), 1.

international approach. The Red International of Labor Unions (PROFINTERN) therefore organized a provisional ITUCNW in 1928 with the aims of "drawing Negro workers into trade unions," "creating independent Negro unions," and "setting up connections with the Negro workers of the World."[3] By converting this embryonic structure into a "permanent international movement" of Black workers at the 1930 conference, the COMINTERN initiated what Michael O. West and William G. Martin call its "most important *organizational* foray into black liberation ever."[4] At the same time, by assembling Black workers of the world in an "international fighting organization" the ITCUNW sought to overcome one of the most intractable divisions of the global working class itself. Ford and Dunne thus exult in the first issue of *The Negro Worker* that "The toiling Negro workers are no more the step-children in the proletarian family," before adding, in a somewhat clunky dialectical pivot, "In this unity the world proletariat has finally been unified."[5]

The founding of the ITCUNW marks the dawn of a new era of global Black labor organizing, and, by extension, a new imaginary of global Black labor as a figure of world-revolutionary potential. Though comparatively muted in the "boom" period of the 1920s, the notion of a worker-centered Black radical internationalism had never really disappeared since the upheavals of 1917 and the Red Summer: As we have seen, Black Atlantic writers of the Harlem Renaissance participated in an emerging proletarian literature movement even as their experiments with narrative and aesthetic form pushed against the limits of the politico-aesthetic program articulated by the radical intelligentsia of the metropole. The upheavals that defined the

[3] Ibid., 4.

[4] Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che. Wilkins, *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 18.

[5] Dunne and Ford, "The Organization of an International Negro Trade Union Bureau," 4.

1930s make continuities with the previous decade easy to ignore. However, Marxist intellectuals like Padmore, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright were consciously responding to already-established political formations even as they sought to forge a radical culture appropriate for the conflicts and crises of the times. Despite the overdrawn "folklore-social protest" binary emblematized by the debate between Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, even Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writers" argued for the necessity of a "consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and molds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today."[6] Wright, like many Black Marxists in the 1930s, understood his purpose to be that of channeling earlier nationalisms and cultural particularisms into a class-conscious universalism. The specter of Garveyism loomed large as writers affiliated with the COMINTERN, the national Communist parties, and the various leftwing writers' groups sought to mold a new aesthetics for the Black masses. Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," born of the race and class wars of 1919, remained the rallying cry of the Black liberation struggle: the poem appears, for example, at the end of an edition of *The Negro Worker* along with an asterisk introducing McKay as a "Jamaican poet, who has also written novels describing Negro working class life."[7] Writers whose careers began during the Harlem Renaissance were also themselves buoyed, politically if not financially, by the rising revolutionary tide of the 1930s. After the stock-market crash "woke him up," Langston Hughes embraced a revolutionary working-class aesthetic fueled by travels to Haiti, Spain, and the Soviet Union.[8] Eric Walrond, after scrapping

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[6] Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994): 102.

[7] *The Negro Worker* 2.7 (July 1932): 31.

[8] Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*, 2nd Hill and Wang ed, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 3.

his Guggenheim-funded history of the Panama Canal, regrouped with his erstwhile ally and original publisher Marcus Garvey in London and began penning militant editorials for the new UNIA organ *The Black Man*. Walrond's previously discussed conversion to anti-capitalist politics in this period was consonant with the efforts of writers like Padmore and James to find a synthesis between Marxism and Pan-Africanism.

Building on the previous, relatively short-lived efforts of Caribbean writers like McKay, George Padmore's "fighting organization" of Black workers sought to establish a new organizational nucleus for Black Labor Internationalism. As I suggested in the introduction, this project reversed the previous historical trajectory of the international workers' movement: Whereas the idea of an international working class had emerged first as "powerful imaginative construct" out of the material foundation of national labor movements, the ITCUNW began as an organized internationalism which thenceforward sought to foment labor movements on the local level.[9] The ITUCNW sought to *produce* a Black international labor movement where none already existed --to build and organize unions and establish relations of solidarity precisely in regions where the workers' movement was in nascent organizational stages, and where processes of class formation were still ongoing. To be sure, there were a whole range of mobilizations and uprisings of various scales across the Black Atlantic world which predated the ITCUNW, but these were, according to organizers, "spasmodic" upheavals, disorganized and disconnected from the "main current" of the proletarian vanguard.[10] The question, then, was how to translate between the international and the local: How, on one hand, might the "international fighting

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[9] Denning, "Representing Global Labor," *Social Text* 92.25.3 (Fall 2007): 126.

[10] George Padmore, "The Negro Liberation Movement and the International Conference," *The Negro Worker* 3.1 (January-February 1930): 3.

organization" give direction to the already existing movements? How, conversely, might the latter extend, adapt or transform this organization by infusing it with new political content?

In this chapter, I focalize these questions through an analysis of the writings and organizing activities of George Padmore, the leading theorist and organizer of Black Labor Internationalism between the wars. In previous chapters we have seen how Black Caribbean writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought to expand the forms and idioms of the proletarian arts movement by attending to the distinctive dynamics of class formation and struggle in the hemispheric Americas. The rhetoric of *The Negro Worker* leading up to the 1930 conference might seem to suggest the triumph of the heroic figure of the proletarian over the ambiguities and representational conundrums that plagued the 1920s writings of Claude McKay and Eric Walrond. Yet slogans declaring Black workers members of the "proletarian family" were not in themselves enough to overcome the various structural impediments to proletarian class formation which shaped the "life and struggles of Negro toilers." For one thing, as Padmore himself observed in a short article called "The Negro Liberation Movement and the International Conference," some of the most strident demonstrations of anti-imperialist militancy came from the peasantry rather than the working-class.[11] In U.S.-Occupied Haiti, peasants "who represent the most exploited section of the population" marched on Port-Au-Prince with machetes and sticks, "bent upon overthrowing the government and seizing the capital." In Basutoland, "a peasant organization called the Lekhotla La Bafo has been established in order to mobilize the agrarian and villages masses against the Europeans, who have already annexed the most fertile sections of the country."[12] Elsewhere, a nascent proletariat had indeed come into being, but

[11] Padmore, "The Negro Liberation Movement," 3.

[12] Ibid.

colonial administrations had taken violent measures to prevent labor organization and ward off the threat of working-class militancy. Still more frequently, there appeared some difficult-to-define hybrid arrangement in which wage labor was combined with systems of direct and violent coercion. These, as Padmore's uneasy toggling between terms suggests, made the figure of the proletarian hard to differentiate from that of the slave.[13] The challenges Padmore faced in *conceiving* and representing the "Negro workers," no less than organizing them, were considerable.

Much as I have done in my analyses of Walrond and McKay, this chapter treats the career of Padmore as an aperture onto a broader political-representational problematic which we can characterize, broadly, as the tension between difference and unity within the composition of global labor. In the two previous chapters I adopted the concept of "translation" to think through the problem of labor as a problem of form: The complexities of the economic translations between concrete and abstract labor in the Black Atlantic world, I have shown, make the figure of the Black worker a site of formal, aesthetic and representational conflict as well as fierce political contestation.[14] The very project of Black working-class literature thus becomes a translational crossroads in which multiple languages, forms and sign systems collide, comingle and creolize with one another. In this chapter, the question of translation appears more directly and immediately as one of political organization. "Wherever labor forces congregate," note Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "the question of translation is constitutive for political

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[13] Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U. Magazine for the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers), 122.

[14] I am drawing here and throughout on Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, 97.

organization."[15] What Neilson and Mezzadra call the "political labor of translation" refers not simply to linguistic translation but to the "embodiment of translation in a whole series of social and material practices…of cooperation, organization and struggle."[16] Indeed, internationalist political organizing is perhaps always translational in that it requires adaptations of concepts and theories to diverse material contexts. Yet the problem of political translation is rendered particularly urgent in cases where the applicability of a dominant discourse, theory, or strategic paradigm is called into question. To conceive Black Labor Internationalism as a translational project means refusing to assume the "Negro Worker" as a static, self-evident subject "out there" waiting to be organized. Such an approach instead requires tracking the complex interplay between organizers' discursive apparatus—the lexicons, concepts, ideologies and assumptions evident at the level of speeches, pamphlets, and essays—and the concrete dynamics of labor organization and struggle in the Black Atlantic World. It is precisely the gaps and caesuras within the figure of the "Negro Worker," I argue, that make the problem of political translation decisive for Black Labor Internationalism.

From the vantage point of the COMINTERN and the ITCUNW, the question of political translation was particularly vexed and urgent precisely because the figure of the "Negro Worker" marked a site at which the aspirational universality of socialist strategy appeared to encounter a series of limits or, at least, complications. It wasn't simply that for Black workers capitalist exploitation was exacerbated by racism or what was often referred to as "racial oppression": Rather, the racialized division of global labor that Du Bois had evoked with the concept of the "color line" shaped processes of class formation in such a way as to necessitate a fundamental

[15] Ibid., 273.

[16] Ibid.

retailoring of Marxist concepts and strategies.[17] Part of what distinguishes Black Labor Internationalism as a radical countercurrent of the workers' movement, I suggest, lies in its ongoing effort to wrestle with the "translation gap" between the dominant theoretical apparatus of interwar Marxism and the distinctive forms of exploitation and oppression which shaped the lives of Black subalterns. Despite the problems they encountered in translating across the global color line, however, Black Labor Internationalists continuously strove, as Manu Goswami puts it in her account of interwar colonial internationalists, to "establish commensurability across world conventionally deemed discrete and separate."[18] Translation, I argue, was not a one-way communication from the already organized workers' movement to "Black workers." Rather, translation entailed an ongoing double-sided process of strategic adjustment, modification, and adaptation which served at once to highlight the heterogeneous and differentiated composition of global labor and, at the same time, to expand the emancipatory possibilities of working-class internationalism. Indeed, it was often precisely the disjuncture between dominant Marxist paradigms and the "lives and struggles of Negro toilers" which generated the most novel and radical theoretical innovations. Black Labor Internationalists tended to work within the "gray area" that Anthony Bogues identifies in his analysis of Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness: Writers like Padmore mastered Marxist "discursive practices" and thought "in the

[17] W. E. B. Du Bois and Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*, American Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 111. Du Bois in the 1930s increasingly framed the problem of the color line in terms of a division of labor. See for example his discussion of the "Dark Proletariat" in *Black Reconstruction* (London: The Free Press, 1935), 16. For accounts of the consolidation of global racial hierarchy and divisions of labor in the early twentieth century see Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 21; Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South*, Second printing, and first paperback printing, America in the World (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012). For history of Communist approaches to the "Negro Question" see Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*.

[18] Goswami, "Imaginary Futures," 1464.

major categories of those practices" while at the same time recognizing their limits. Yet, as Bogues argues in his theorization of the Black radical "Heretic," this "torturous conundrum is not a static one and can generate creative deployment of ideas, particularly because those in this position inhabit a space and social location that facilitates radicalism."[19]

From the very beginning, the effort to convoke a global "Negro Worker" implied a whole series of complex negotiations between plurality and unity. The very phrase "Negro Worker" was not simply a reflection of reality but an argument. Embedded in the original mission of the ITUCNW were two simultaneous propositions: On one hand, that all "Negro Workers" shared a set of common problems which constituted the basis for a unified imagined community; and on the other, that this community was itself, as one contributor to *The Negro Worker put it*, "part and parcel of the whole international proletariat."[20] These two propositions are efficiently condensed in Langston Hughes' poem "Always the Same," published in the September, 1932 edition of *The Negro Worker*. Hughes takes up the standpoint of the journal's titular figure to articulate the universal condition of Black exploitation:

It is the same everywhere for me:
On the docks at Sierra Leone,
In the cotton fields of Alabama,
In the diamond mines of Kimberley,
On the coffee hills of Haiti,
The banana lands of Central America,
The streets of Harlem,
And the cities of Morocco and Tripoli.

Black:
Exploited, beaten and robbed,
Shot and killed.
Blood running into

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[19] Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, Africana Thought (New York: Routledge, 2003), 14.

[20] A. Lozovsky, "Negro Workers Awakening," *The Negro Worker* 3.7 (May 1, 1930): 1.

Dollars
Pounds
Francs
Pesetas
Lire[21]

By framing this transnational catalogue of oppression and exploitation as the experience of a univocal "me," Hughes performs a rhetorical singularization of the global Black worker that is obviously complementary to the mission of the ITCUNW. Hughes' poetic construction of the global Negro worker exemplifies, in Goswami's terms, how comparison functions at once as "an epistemological practice and a vernacular politics."[22] Yet Hughes' assertion that Black struggles are "always the same" is perhaps more accurately understood as an attempt to render the very problem of comparison irrelevant. The project of establishing global alliance here takes the form of an assertion of identity: It is not only similar, but "the same"; not many subjects in different places but one subject in all places. In this particular iteration of the Black Labor Internationalist aesthetic, moreover, the terms employed to establish racial unity are identical to those used to establish interracial working-class solidarity. The blood spilled by Black workers into the world's various national currencies is, in the subsequent stanzas, diverted into the "deep channels of Revolution" and, finally, "makes one with the blood/ Of all the struggling workers in the world—" In the concluding stanza Hughes converts the blood of the workers into an emblem of a multiracial socialist coalition: "Until the Red Armies of the International Proletariat/ Their faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown,/ Unite to raise the blood-red flag that/Never will come

[21] Langston Hughes, "Always the Same," *The Negro Worker* 2.9 (September 1932): 31-32.

[22] Goswami, "Imaginary Futures," 1464.

down!”[23] Thus, difference is sublated into unity and the conditions of oppression and transformed into the basis for global revolution.

Hughes’ poem can be understood as a kind of manifesto for Black Labor Internationalism: Its vision of global Black unity *as* global working-class unity delineates the “horizon of expectation” which animates a great deal of Black Labor Internationalist organizing and intellectual production across the 1930s.[24] What happens, though, when invocations of similitude and universal oppression are not enough? By the end of World War II, Hughes’ vision of a universal proletarian army appeared to have suffered irreparable damage. Padmore, having broken from the COMINTERN and distanced himself from various official left formations, now stood at the helm of a revived and radicalized Pan-Africanism. The Fifth Pan-African Congress retailored the language of working-class internationalism for the Black anticolonial struggle, declaring that “Colonial workers must be in the front of the battle against Imperialism. Your weapons-the Strike and the Boycott-are invincible… Colonial and Subject Peoples of the World-Unite!”[25] This new faith in the revolutionary agency of the colonized was paired with deepening cynicism about the old dream of proletarian unity. As George Padmore put it to St. Clair Drake in an interview following the congress:

I tell all the young Africans, read Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, all of them, to see what you can learn from them about freeing your country. And because they’re white don’t dismiss them ‘cause ideas don’t know any color line. Study the way the Communist Party organizes, they are great organizers…But don’t ever sign anything and don’t join the First, Second, Third, Fourth or ‘Fifth’ International. If you need an international, organize a ‘black international.’ Next, study the Soviet Union, you’re going to have to develop your country. Those people learned how to develop a country so fast that they stood up to Hitler—find out how they did it. But your job is to deal with Africa and don’t let them lead you astray by saying someday the European proletariat

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[23] Hughes, “Always the Same.”

[24] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 259.

[25] George Padmore, ed., *Colonial and Coloured Unity: A Program of Action; History of the Pan-African Congress* (Hammersmith: London, 1947)

is going to lay down its tools in order to free colonials—they ain't going to do it. But I'll tell you what could happen—someday you may get strong enough so that if you pull Africa out of the imperial structure you'll force those workers up there to go left and build socialism in their own country.[26]

Padmore's instructions to the young African nationalists reflect the now well-known disappointments of the interwar period: Most importantly, the COMINTERN's betrayal of the anti-colonial struggle with the tactical shift towards alliance with "democratic-imperialist" nations and the subsequent failure of the Western left to mobilize around anti-imperialism. Yet Padmore does not equate disaffiliation from the Soviet Union with a break from socialism or Marxism; he is, on the contrary, concerned precisely with differentiating the study of Marxist ideas, which "know no color line," from political subordination to the various organized Marxist internationals. Padmore's original articulation of a "black international" appears here as a kind of playful riff on the communist international, what Fred Moten might call a moment of "collisive interplay" between Black anticolonial and socialist internationalisms.[27] Padmore's instructions to the cadres of African nationalists assert the necessity of Black political, organizational, and intellectual autonomy—including the autonomy to reimagine and extend Marxism.[28] The Black International is indeed, as Edwards has written, a "peculiar kind of negation," for while it on one hand resists assimilation into organized communism it also envisions Pan-African liberation as a potential catalyst for the global socialist revolution that was betrayed by the metropolitan proletariat.[29] No simple figure of racial separatism, then, the Black International is at one and the

[26] George Shepperson and St. Clare Drake, "The Fifth Pan-African Congress, 1945 and the All African Peoples Congress, 1958," *Contributions in Black Studies* 8.5 (2008): 21. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 249.

[27] Fred Moten, "Not In Between: Lyric Painting, Visual History and the Postcolonial Future," *TDR The Drama Review* 47.1 (Spring 2003): 131.

[29] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*.

same time an autonomous project of Pan-African revolution and a novel transmutation of 1930's "international fighting organization."

What would it mean, then, to read Padmore as a "translator" of Marx? Brent Hayes Edwards has posed the question of translation as it pertains to Padmore's collaborations with French West African Labor organizer Tiemoki Garan Kouyaté. Padmore's English translations of Kouyaté's pamphlets,' Edwards suggests, involve not only linguistic adaptations but "specifically ideological departures and revisions, rephrasings of the political 'language' of black internationalism."[30] Edwards' notion of an evolving Black internationalist "language" is, I suggest, pertinent more generally to Padmore's writing on the labor question. Indeed, Padmore continuously engages in such processes of ideological revision and rephrasing even when working within a Black Anglophone frame of reference. Padmore was known for his flexible and highly adaptable approach to anti-imperialist politics, and the strategic adjustments he made—particularly after his break with the COMINTERN—have justly been celebrated as watersheds in the formation of an autonomous Black radical internationalism.[31] C.L.R. James wrote in a posthumous tribute to Padmore that, during his time in the COMINTERN, "George acquired an extraordinary skill, of which I was many times the witness in later years, of understanding a situation from the slenderest data and writing a programme, outlining a policy and indicating a

[30] Edwards, 282.

[31] Assessments of Padmore's contributions to global Black movements tend to stress his pragmatism, "organizational" thinking, and his prioritizing of praxis over theory. Leslie James suggests that Padmore's "writing and his organizing were never distinct spheres: his writing was a form of action." Indeed, the question "what is to be done?" was, for Padmore, always paramount. James' *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below* provides a thorough analysis of the strategic adaptations Padmore made after WWII. Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10–11. See also Fitzroy André Baptiste and Rupert Lewis, eds., *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary*, Caribbean Reasonings (Kingston ; Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2009).

line of action by untaught and inexperienced blacks in a particular situation could direct themselves. This was his work."[32] Despite its obviously pragmatic orientation, what James calls Padmore's "extraordinary skill" might be viewed as akin to that of a translator: From the interpretation of data through the articulation of a "line of action," Padmore's organizing involves multiple stages of linguistic and conceptual remediation. In seeking to translate Black subalterns' experiences into the conceptual vocabulary of Marxist internationalism, Padmore facilitated a process of collective meaning-making which, according to James, developed "the consciousness among blacks that they were part of an international movement."[33] Yet, again, this was not a one-sided process in which theory was rigidly and mechanically applied to Black workers' various situations: The "labor of translation" ultimately contributed to important large-scale modifications of the theoretical apparatus itself.

In the pages that follow, I explore the evolution of Padmore's writing and organizing work from the 1930 conference of Negro Workers through *How Britain Rules Africa*, the critical dissection of British Imperialism published amidst the Pan-African ferment of mid-1930s London. During this period Padmore migrated across nations, institutions and political-ideological formations while fostering a network of Black labor organizers and anticolonial nationalists which spanned the globe. At the same time, I will argue, Padmore's study of the global "Negro Question" led him to develop a novel analysis of imperial accumulation as a contradictory force which both animates and impedes the development of the global class struggle. This analysis is never presented as such in fully synthesized form but rather evolves piecemeal, through pamphlets and essays which tend to be preoccupied with the presentation of

[32] C.L.R. James, "Notes on the Life of George Padmore," in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 290.

[33] Ibid.

empirical data. Indeed, the prioritization of "facts" turns out itself to be a key part of the argument: Padmore over time became convinced that an accurate portrayal of colonial class struggles required that Marxist theory, as he put it, be "bent" to the facts.[34] This conviction developed from a basic requirement of research into a kind of doxa. Padmore asserts the sovereignty of the factual, practicing a kind of insurgent empiricism that disrupts while at the same time inhabiting the concepts and categories of COMINTERN Marxism.

I will below show that Padmore's preference for "information-heavy" surveys and studies itself emerged out of an awareness that certain Marxist scripts fail to capture the distinctive dynamics of exploitation and struggle in the colonial world.[35] At the same time, Padmore grounded this pragmatic commitment to "facts" itself in a certain strain of Marxism, namely that represented by Lenin. Even after his break with organized Communism, Padmore celebrated Lenin's "pragmatic" turn to the colonial world as a "heretical departure from orthodox Marxism" and a "refusal to follow blindly his master's theories." Padmore's assessment of Lenin crystallizes the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in Marxism's "eastward migration."[36] Is it fair to characterize Padmore himself as continuing something like a Leninist "tradition" in pursuing his own heretical departure from Marxist orthodoxy? What does it mean to identify oneself with a tendency or line of thinking while at the same time defining that line in terms of its willingness to break from the "masters' theory"? Padmore's engagement with the thought of Lenin, I want to argue, does something more than simply recapitulate the Bolshevik theorists' arguments. This engagement is itself pragmatic and translational: It must, in other words, be

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[34] George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc), 279.

[35] Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London ; New York: Verso, 2019), 355.

[36] Harry D. Harootunian, *Marx after Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 73.

understood within the context of Padmore's own effort to bend theory to the facts in his analysis of Black workers' struggles.

Explicating Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism,* Padmore observed that "The capitalist system had, in Lenin's lifetime, reached out into the remotest corners of the earth—into decadent Asian and darkest Africa—drawing the great continents into its tenacles and squeezing super-profits from the toil of hundreds of millions of the 'lesser breeds without the law.'"[37] Lenin's account of global imperial expansion implied that the struggle for socialism in imperialist nations was necessarily an anti-imperialist struggle. It was also in the context of his analysis of imperialism, however, that Lenin developed an influential account of a key obstacle to the generalization of global class struggle, namely the so-called "aristocracy of labor." Britain's vast colonial empire and monopolist position in the world market meant that, historically, the British working class tended to be divided between "a favored minority of labor aristocrats and a much larger lower stratum."[38] This argument, too, proved useful to Padmore: "Lenin saw clearly what Marx, having died before Imperialism attained its zenith, was unable to foresee, namely, the gradual corruption of the European Socialist movement through their bourgeoisification."[39] Building on Engels' 1858 observation that "the English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois," Lenin observed a growing conflict between "opportunism" in the ranks of the proletariat and the "general and vital interests of the working-class movement."[40] A section of the working class becomes bourgeoisie," Lenin observes, while

[37] George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*, 279.

[38] Eric Hobsbawm, Lenin and the "Aristocracy of Labor," *Monthly Review* 64.7 (December 2012)

[39] Ibid.

[40] Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2011), 108.

another section "permits itself to be led by men sold to, or at least, paid by the bourgeoisie."[41] Lenin, however, ultimately predicted that the intensifying rivalry between imperialist powers spelled the doom of this opportunism: The same forces that had created the labor-aristocracy would ultimately lead to its collapse, like a "malignant abscess" growing quickly and finally bursting on a "healthy body."[42]

Lenin's analysis of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism became a key reference point for Padmore and, indeed, for Black Labor Internationalism in general.[43] It was precisely the conquest, annexation and division of colonial territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that created the conditions in which the Colonial Question and the Negro Question acquired such salience for the COMINTERN.[44] The structural links imperialism had established between metropolitan and colonial economies made it possible to envision anticolonial and proletarian revolutions occurring in a unified and coordinated sequence. Yet while imperialism had created the conditions for global revolution, it had certainly not provided any necessary or automatic guarantees for global working-class unity. Throughout the 1930s, Padmore's frustration with metropolitan labor led him to cast doubt on the sequence of events and distribution of historical roles assigned by what he came to call "orthodox Marxism."[45] Moving away from the ITCUNW's vision of a global proletarian family, Padmore began to attend more

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[41] Ibid., 107.

[42] Ibid., 126.

[43] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

[44] See Lenin, "Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions at the Second Congress of the Communist International," in *Lenin on the National and Colonial Questions* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967.): 21-26.

. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*.
[45] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 20.

closely to what Adom Getachew might call the "unequal integration" of Black workers into racial division of global labor.[46] This shift did not entail relinquishing the effort to translate between discrepant sites of struggle: Rather, after his break from the COMINTERN, Padmore analyzed how the unequal integration of colonial labor reshaped the dynamics of class struggle both within the colonies and on a global scale. To grasp the conditions which gave rise to this analysis it is crucial to appreciate the extent to which Padmore was, throughout these years, engaged simultaneously with two fronts of struggle: While organizing a colonial labor movement Padmore was also consistently seeking to agitate metropolitan labor around anti-imperialism.[47] This dual orientation fostered a global perspective which cut against the prevailing nationalist trends of the popular front era. It provided a vantage point which revealed the mutually constitutive relation between the racialized construction of the national citizen-worker in one sphere and the "primitive accumulation" of Black labor power in the other.[48]

In the two sections below, I track the evolution of Padmore's thinking about imperialism as a driver of class struggle across two key moments. First, I analyze how Padmore during his years in the ITCUNW sought to adapt the theoretical apparatus and lexicon of the COMINTERN to the conditions of Black subalterns across the Atlantic world. Reading against the grain of the proletarian vanguardist paradigm which shaped the COMINTERN's approach to the "Negro question," I show how Padmore sought to reshape narratives of global capitalist development to account for the countless "distorted" and "backwards" forms of exploitation which appeared in the colonies and the U.S. South. In the second section I turn to Padmore's analysis of what he

[46] Getachew, 18.

[47] For an analysis of Padmore's influence on the British left see Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London ; New York: Verso, 2019), 355-395.

[48] Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, 101.

termed “Colonial-Fascism” in the context of his Pan-Africanist organizing work in London. The fascism concept is key for Padmore, not only as a rhetorical device, but as a heuristic which helps him to advance his analysis of the labor problem in colonial Africa. Padmore’s analysis of Colonial-Fascism initiates a thoroughgoing revision of the orthodoxies which had constrained him during the COMINTERN years, highlighting, for example, the decisive impact of state-sanctioned racism on processes of colonial class formation. Yet with this concept Padmore also renews and revises his effort to translate between metropole and periphery: If in the COMINTERN years the figure of the Black toiler appeared to mark a deviation from the historical logic of proletarian class development, the concept of “Colonial-Fascism” recasts the totality of the world-imperial system as a fractured reflection of the Black colonial situation.

While this chapter’s pivot from poems and short stories to the nonfictional genres of a political activist might appear to represent a dramatic shift, I will aim to demonstrate here that Padmore’s speeches, surveys and pamphlets themselves constitute a kind of political-representational practice which bears a similar kind of scrutiny to that typically reserved for literary works. Padmore merits consideration alongside McKay and Walrond, not only because of what he shares with them in terms of Black West Indian identity and radical political sympathies, but because his efforts to convoke a global Black working-class subject places him in the same broad Black Atlantic universe of political desire and meaning-making. Readers may have observed that in previous chapters the problem of representing Black Caribbean labor, because of the pressures of outmigration which drove the itineraries of both workers and writers, gradually morphed into the problem of representing global Black Labor itself. As I suggested, McKay’s “vagabonds” and Walrond’s “peons” crystallized the social tensions inherent in processes of Caribbean class formation which were increasingly transnational in scope. These

figures stood at the juncture of the peasantry and the proletariat, the Caribbean and the world. Padmore's global survey of the "Negro Toilers"—a term whose significance I will explore below—encompasses the scenes of Caribbean semi-proletarianization and peasant contraction designated by the two previous figures. At the same time, Padmore distinguishes himself from McKay and Walrond by recasting Caribbean, African American, and African workers as members of a global Black Working Class. While previous chapters have attempted quite granular and focused analyses of processes of class formation within the hemispheric Americas, then, then this chapter follows the migration of Caribbean Marxist thought in "detour" across the Atlantic.[49]

*Padmore's Toilers: Bending Theory to the Facts*

We might note, as a point of departure, a significant terminological problem which emerges in the *The Negro Worker*'s promotion of the 1930 conference. In keeping with the name of the newspaper, the event was officially titled and advertised as the International Conference of Negro Workers. Yet Padmore's initial advertisement refers to an "International Conference of Toiling Negroes," and other promotional materials vacillate between "worker" and "toiler" as a primary figure of global Black labor. An advertisement on the first page of the June 15th installment of *The Negro Worker*, for example, gives "REVOLUTIONARY GREETINGS TO THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NEGRO WORKERS" but in smaller font hails the "international gathering of Negro toilers."[50] What are we to make, if anything, of the persistence of this figure of the "toiler" alongside the more familiar "worker"? That Padmore

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[49] Édouard Glissant *Poetics of Relation*, trans Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
[50] George Padmore, "Revolutionary Greetings to the First International Conference of Negro Workers," *The Negro Worker* 3.9 (June 15th, 1930): 1.

ultimately settled on the former as his preferred designation in such encyclopedic surveys as *The Life and Struggle of Negro Toilers*, despite the use of "worker" in the official names of the paper and PROFINTERN committee, is significant. The term toiler is an English translation of the Russian *truzhenik* (труженик), which translates also to "hard worker" or "plodder," as opposed to *rabochiy* (рабочий), which refers simply to a worker or laborer.[51] Toilers tend to appear in Soviet discourse when a specific effort is being made to broaden the referential scope of labor beyond the industrial working class, as for example, in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), which trained teachers and revolutionary cadres from the eastern periphery of the Soviet Union as well as India, Iran, China, and other parts of Asia and Africa.[52] The KUTV might indeed be particularly significant to Padmore's adoption of the term: The university's focus on peripheral regions of global capitalism meant that it, in the words of the first rector Grigory Isaakovich Broido, would have to "chart untrodden paths" and address questions that had not yet been solved by Marxist theory.[53] I want to hold on to this unsettled and interrogative possibility opened by the toiler. For Padmore, I suggest, the toiler functions as a figure for the geographic and political hinterland of the global Negro Question, designating a space in which the meanings of labor and class struggle are continuously stretched and reformulated.

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[51] See Della F. Thompson, *The Oxford Color Russian Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Barry Crowe, *Concise Dictionary of Soviet Terminology, Institutions, and Abbreviations* (Oxford: Permanon Press, 1969). Thanks to Greg Afinogenov for clarifying.

[52] See Masha Kirasirova, "The "East" as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East." Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 18, no. 1 (2017): 7-34.

[53] Ibid., 9.

It has often been observed that Padmore preferred empirical documentation over the abstractions of "theory."[54] Indeed, the data-driven nature of Padmore's work makes some of his larger conceptual interventions difficult to reconstruct. Despite his centrality to Black labor struggles in the interwar years (his thousands of connections with activists across the diaspora led one writer to call him an "institution all by himself")[55], Padmore produced no single text approaching, or even aspiring to, the monumental status of James' *The Black Jacobins* or W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction.* Padmore's writing, though it contains numerous historical accounts of British Imperialism and colonial economic development, generally takes the form of immediate pragmatic interventions in particular historical conjunctures: the global economic crisis of the 1930s, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the Gold Coast revolution.[56] Padmore rarely tried to distance himself from the "fever and the fret" of his moment, never endeavored to produce a "classic" text that would outlast the struggles of his time. The texts that he did produce are characterized above all else by synchronic breadth rather than diachronic depth; their primary movements are through geographic space instead of historical time. In contrast to C.L.R. James and Du Bois' efforts to sublate the struggles of the 1930s into epic chronicles of revolutionary upheaval, Padmore sought to tabulate, document, survey, and assemble endless swaths of data as they came to light in real historical time. While they turned to the past to gauge possibilities for the future, he remained grounded in the exigencies present; while they, and particularly James,

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[54]James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*, 11; Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 197; Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 355.

[55] James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967).

[56] George Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U. Magazine for the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers), *How Britain Rules Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1936), *The Gold Coast Revolution*: The Struggle of an African People from Slavery to Freedom (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1953)

sought figural embodiments of the Black masses in revolutionary heroes, Padmore's corpus appears as a continuous proliferation of localized struggles-- the "day to day problems of the Negro toilers," as Padmore called them in an early call for contributions to *The Negro Worker* (initially called *International Negro Workers' Review*)—whose political meanings remain open and contested.[57]

The privileging of empirical data Padmore's writing on one hand reflects the "forensic, report-based" genres of a committed Black activist whose intellectual labor was, by and large, instrumentally linked to immediate political-organizational aims. Leslie James indeed suggests that Padmore "did not see himself as an intellectual." Instead, Padmore "laboured to imprint the evidence that could serve as the basis for a sustained attack upon the hypocrisy of benevolent empire. He worked to make things concrete, understandable, and therefore attackable."[58] Yet despite this commitment to concretion, Padmore's writing is not innocent of ideology. Padmore inherits a lexicon and a set of assumptions from the political organization he serves, the Third Period COMINTERN, even while the latter also provides tools with which to gather and synthesize "raw" empirical data. Padmore's desire to subordinate theory to empirical research is evident in an early address to his readers: "But it is our aim not to make this a sort of 'theoretical' journal to discuss resolutions, "opinions" etc. . . . It is our aim to discuss and analyse the day-to-day problems of the Negro toilers and connect these up with the international struggles and problems of the workers."[59] This qualifier can be read as Padmore's attempt to distance *The Negro Worker*'s research agenda from the official principles articulated in previous

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[57] George Padmore, "Our Aims," *The International Negro Workers' Review* 1.1 (January, 1931): 3.

[58] James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*, 11.
[59] Padmore, "Our Aims," 3.

COMINTERN theses on Black labor. There had indeed been no lack of rancorous debate or "resolutions" on the Colonial and Negro questions before the founding of the ITUCNW, and Padmore here seems to chaff against the demand to resolve questions of strategy and theory before gathering input from the Black workers themselves.[60] Yet the research program of the ITUCNW was of course itself the product of those previous debates and resolutions, and Padmore is compelled to announce the principles drawn up in the 1930 conference in Hamburg while soliciting contributions.[61] The question, then, is whether the postulates of COMINTERN "theory" will be mechanically imposed on the "day-to-day problems" of Black workers or will instead be derived and reshaped through a concrete analysis of those problems.

Padmore's attempt to insulate the discussion and analysis of Black workers' struggles from the theoretical apparatus of the COMINTERN is itself, I want to suggest, a political decision whose implications ramify far beyond an individual preference for empiricism. Padmore's unglamorous role as the data-gatherer and consummate empiricist of the Black radical tradition points to an uneven distribution of epistemic authority within the COMINTERN which is itself traceable to larger politico-economic asymmetries. Padmore's position as researcher on the global Negro question reflects what Gavin Walker has recently called a "division of labor between theory or 'theoretical concepts' and data or 'empirical concepts'" which underwrites and reproduces a "cartographic imaginary of 'the West' and 'the Rest.'"[62] For Walker, a true critique of Eurocentrism would ultimately shed light on the historical production of this schema itself, rather than mobilizing the putative substantiality of Third World "difference" in opposition

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[60] Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism,* 3-46.

[61] Padmore, "Our Aims."

[62] Gavin Walker, "The Postcolonial and the Politics of the Outside: Return(s) of the National Question in Marxist Theory," *Viewpoint* (Feb 1, 2018), 7.

to theoretical abstraction. Following Walker's suggestion, I want to suggest Padmore's political-representational practice, information-heavy though it may be, ultimately registers an effort to "bend theory to facts" rather than simply accumulate them. The ongoing construction of the "Negro toiler" as a composite of various local specificities and quotidian particularities—the so-called "day-to-day problems" of Black laborers across the diaspora—can in this sense be read alongside and in opposition to the surrounding theoretical discourses which necessarily animate Padmore's research agenda.

The opposition between empirical and theoretical modes of knowledge production acquires its salience for Padmore against the backdrop of the process of imperial expansion that Lenin surveyed in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism.* This process created at one and the same time a new structural entanglement between discrete spheres of struggle and a growing awareness of the non-universality of any single sphere, including the British experience of industrial development that had served as Marx's key case study in *Capital*.[63] Perhaps the most crucial and vexing question of Marxism in the age of Imperialism was that of how this non-universality was to be reconciled with the historical dialectic of class struggle and the transition to socialism. The "theoretical" answers given to this question were themselves the product of historical experiences, none of which were more catalytic than the October Revolution of 1917. Because it revealed that the transition to socialism did not depend on a prior period of bourgeois-led development, the Russian Revolution appeared, as Antonio Gramsci put it, as a "Revolution

[63] COMINTERN debates on the Colonial Question register a growing awareness of the difficulties involved in translating strategy between discrete spheres of struggle. See *Theses and Resolutions Adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern* in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Progress Publishers, Moscow 1965): 184-202; *Theses on the Eastern Question* in Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International: Documents,* 3 vols. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971), pp. 384.; and Lenin, "Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution," in *Collected Works* Vol. 33, 418-33.

against Karl Marx's *Capital*."[64] In this sense, 1917 itself required a new bending of theory to facts; as the proletariat launched Russia forward over the bourgeois stage of development, proclaimed Gramsci, "events overcame ideology."[65] Of course, this revolution "against Capital" itself in turn became the basis for a new theoretical discourse, producing its own concepts, "laws" and abstractions. On one hand, the experience of 1917 broke the spell of orthodox Marxist evolutionism, revealing, as Trotsky would write, that "the laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism."[66] Yet Russia's great leap forward was understood to have been conditional upon proletarian leadership. Indeed, 1917 in some ways seemed to magnify the importance of a proletarian vanguard, who were now tasked with both carrying out the bourgeois-democratic revolution and leading the transition beyond this stage to socialism. These two conflicting legacies of the Russian experience—on one hand, the possibility of a rupture from a Western sequence of historic stages; on the other, an intensified investment in the proletariat as the agent of that rupture—both shaped the COMINTERN's approach to the colonial question.

The COMINTERN's evolving formulation of revolutionary strategy for the colonial world in the wake of 1917 can be described as an ongoing war between what Trotsky called "pedantic schematism" and the search for alternative trajectories to socialism. No figure embodied the tension more dramatically than Lenin, whose analysis of the political economy of imperialism seemed to suggest the non-universalizability of the theory of proletarian class

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[64] Antonio Gramsci, "The Revolution Against 'Capital,'" in *A. Gramsci Selections From Political Writings 1910-1920* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977): 34-38.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Anchor Foundation: Distributed by Pathfinder Press, 1987,) 32.

leadership he developed at the national level. Padmore in *Pan-Africanism or Socialism* celebrated Lenin's turn to the colonial world as a break from Marxist orthodoxy:

> Lenin, faithful disciple of Marx though he was, unlike so many of his latter-day followers, disavowed dogmatism. He was a realist who refused to follow blindly his master's theories; he bent theory to the facts, not facts to the theory. Seeing that the Western European workers were in no hurry to perform the historic role which Marx had assigned them in his Communist Manifesto, Lenin decided to forget about them and reach out to those who, still uncorrupted by capitalist reforms, yearned to break the fetters of imperialist domination.[67]

This, however, is a selective portrait: As we have seen, Lenin held out hope that European workers would fulfill their vanguard function even while advocating a greater dedication of resources to the colonial struggle.[68] Padmore is not so much summarizing Lenin's thinking as he is pitting one Lenin against the other: Lenin the pragmatic anti-colonialist emerges triumphant over Lenin the proletarian vanguardist. Since the latter ultimately influenced COMINTERN colonial policy as much as the former, however, it is important to track both lines of influence on Padmore's work. This will allow us to appreciate the true significance of the revisionist interpretation above, which ultimately reflects Padmore's *own* effort to "bend theory to the facts" in the analysis of colonial class struggle.

Beginning in the 1890s, Lenin sought to defend the validity of the evolutionary Marxist paradigm despite the relatively underdeveloped state of Russian capitalism.[69] While the crystallization of a conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie remained incomplete within Russia's largely agrarian economy, Lenin argued that the logic of the overarching historical

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[67] Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*, 272.

[68] Lenin in the 1920 report on the National and Colonial Questions argued that "there can be no purely proletarian movement" in colonial countries. While this did not necessarily occlude the possibility of a transition to socialism, the latter could only occur, he argued, with the "aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries." See "Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions," 138, 139.

[69] See Ronaldo Munch, *Rethinking Development: Marxist Perspectives* (Dublin: Palgrave, 2021), 65. See also Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought* (London: Verso, 2009).

process nonetheless pointed toward the industrial proletariat serving as the leading force in the class struggle. Lenin initially developed his argument for the proletarian as vanguard through a critique of the Narodniks, who viewed the peasant economy as the embryo of socialism. Contesting what he considered a romantic idealization of the peasantry, Lenin asserted that "the Russian worker is the sole and natural representative of Russia's entire working and exploited population":

Natural because the exploitation of the working people in Russia is everywhere capitalist in nature, if we leave out of account the moribund remnants of serf economy; but the exploitation of the mass of producers is on a small scale, scattered and undeveloped, while the exploitation of the factory proletariat is on a large scale, socialised and concentrated. In the former case, exploitation is still enmeshed in medieval forms, various political, legal and conventional trappings, tricks and devices, which hinder the working people and their ideologists from seeing the essence of the system which oppresses the working people, from seeing where and how a way can be found out of this system. In the latter case, on the contrary, exploitation is fully developed and emerges in its pure form, without any confusing details. The worker cannot fail to see that he is oppressed by capital, that his struggle has to be waged against the bourgeois class. And this struggle, aimed at satisfying his immediate economic needs, at improving his material conditions, inevitably demands that the workers organise, and inevitably becomes a war not against individuals, but against a class, the class which oppresses and crushes the working people not only in the factories, but everywhere. That is why the factory worker is none other than the foremost representative of the entire exploited population.[70]

"Moribund elements of the serf economy" are here cast as anachronistic vestiges that distort the essentially capitalist nature of exploitation in the countryside. In the industrial factory, by contrast, the capitalist nature of exploitation is undeniable. The factory in other words clarifies the *direction* of historical progress within a politico-economic context of underdevelopment. By shedding the trappings of precapitalist forms of domination the factory grants a more accurate vantage point onto the whole economy, which is otherwise clouded by the "confusing details" of "medieval forms." Factory workers are therefore representative, despite being a numerical

[70] V.I. Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' Are and How they Fight the Social-Democrats," in Collected Works, Vol. 1, 1893-1894 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), 299.

minority, because they occupy a structural position in relation to capital that is more advanced—in other words, indicative of a general historical-developmental trend that affects or will affect the whole population. Lenin's account of the proletarian vanguard transforms a theory of history into a rational for political representation, positing a temporal hierarchy of class strata within a unilinear narrative of historical development. Proletarian vanguardism thus achieved what Massimiliano Tomba would call the "processualization" of the concept of the proletarian: By representing this class strata as the vector of historical progress, Lenin "ordered and temporalized an enlarged geographic field," producing an "axiology between that which is developed and that which is residual."[71] By the time the ITCUNW was founded, this axiology functioned in COMINTERN theory as a general narrative-temporal schema that organized the entirety of the globe. The world's diverse forms and instances of struggles were now taxonomized according to a hierarchy of stages defined by their relative proximity to the "pure form" of the proletarian struggle. This meant that even in cases where this "pure form" was compromised or distorted by other social factors, the latter could be written off as "confusing details," temporary distractions, and mere contingencies. Vestiges of earlier forms of domination were, in Koselleck's terms, only aspects of the "space of experience" which would necessarily be transcended as history advanced towards the horizon of the proletarian struggle.[72]

The Leninist processualization of class strata was reproduced on a global scale in the COMINTERN's approach to the Negro Question. The resolutions on the international Negro Question that preceded the founding of the ITUCNW tended to reflect an assumption that Black entry into the class struggle was contingent upon the crystallization of proletarian leadership. The

[71] Massimiliano Tomba, Peter D. Thomas, and Sara R. Farris, *Marx's Temporalities*, Historical Materialism Book Series, volume 44 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2013), viii.
[72] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 259.

Fourth Congress in 1922—a flashpoint, as we have seen, in the career of Claude McKay as well as COMINTERN strategy—produced a thesis on the Negro Question that began, significantly, with an historical narrative of Black Struggles in the U.S. Tracing a history of African American resistance from slavery through the postwar race riots, the section concludes: "Combined with the impact of the Blacks' integration into industry in the North, this assigns to American Blacks, especially in the North, a place in the vanguard of the struggle against oppression in Africa."[73] This exceptionalist narrative of the African American proletariat was revived at the American Negro Labor Congress, where Lovett Fort-Whiteman claimed that "the American Negro worker by reason of his historical experience in such a country as America, where capitalism has reached its highest stage of development, seems well fitted to take the leadership of the Negro Race of the World in its struggle against World Imperialism."[74] The ANLC's delegation of a leadership role to the African American proletariat echoed the U.S. vanguardism of earlier Pan-Africanisms, which tended to reflect an assumption that a Black New World elite would guide all African-descended people towards modernity.[75] Such assumptions about the vanguard role of the New World industrial proletariat would be challenged, and in some ways even inverted, as Padmore assigned the liberation of Africa an increasingly central role in the world revolution. A general understanding that Black workers were now part and parcel of the global "proletarian family," as we have seen, functioned as the guiding framework for the ITUCNW through the International Conference of Negro Workers in 1930. It was also at the conference, however, that

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[73] "Fourth Congress of the Communist International—Resolutions 1922: Theses on the Black Question," in *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, trans. and ed. John Riddell (Boston: Brill, 2012)

[74] Qtd. in Hadim Aki, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*, 34.

[75] See Kenneth W. Warren, "Appeals for Misrecognition," in *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed., Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (London: Duke University Press, 1993): 399.

this assumption first came into significant conflict with the concrete reality of Pan-African struggles. In the months approaching the conference it became clear that European parties had done little to recruit colonial delegates or engage in the political education work deemed necessary to form revolutionary cadres in the colonial world.[76] It thus fell upon ITUCNW organizers to establish contacts with colonial workers. Padmore was assigned to undertake a West African recruitment mission with E.F. Small, founder of the Bathurst Trade Union and the Gambian cooperative movement. Despite some harassment by immigration officials, Padmore found reason for optimism on the organizing journey, which took him through Gambia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, and the Gold Coast. In addition to recruiting several delegates, Padmore noted in a letter that he observed "strong anti-imperialist sentiment everywhere."[77] In his travels throughout the region, notes Aki, Padmore established connections that he'd continue to nurture and expand in future organizing work for both the COMINTERN and Pan-Africanist organizations. While African delegates from South Africa, as well as French, Belgian, and Portuguese Colonies, were prevented from attending by colonial governments or other unspecified reasons, Padmore and Small's organizing mission brought the tally of West African delegates to five. The increase in African representation made for a noteworthy shift in tone from the mostly U.S.-dominated previous conferences. Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, an Indian member of the League Against Imperialism and German Communist Party, concluded an otherwise celebratory report on the conference by stating "There is one observation that deserves to be recorded concerning the Negro conference": "There was a marked difference between the Negroes from the United States who are industrial workers with completely proletarian

[76] Aki, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* , 98.

[77] Ibid., 102

psychology and outlook and the delegates from Africa who have more of the mentality of the small farmer. The conditions of the problem in Africa necessitates different methods and tactics from those in the U.S.A., and there may be a tendency for the Negro workers from the U.S.A. to look at the African Negro Question too much from the American point of view."[78]

Chattopadhyaya's comments register a new willingness to challenge the assumption that the African American proletariat provides a universalizable model for global Black struggles. Given the acclamatory tone of most published COMINTERN reporting on the conference, these observations stand out: The tactical disagreements between African and U.S. delegations must have been significant. The "agrarian question" was exerting greater pressure as colonial representation increased. It was Padmore who most explicitly attempted to shift ITCUNW's strategic orientation to reflect the growing prominence of rural populations within the organization. Drawing on knowledge culled from his organizing activities, Padmore delivered a speech at the conference called "The Economic Struggles of Negro Workers." This speech, which was published in the October 15th 1930, edition of *The Negro Worker*, represents something of a break from the exhortative sloganeering of Padmore's pre-conference writing. Padmore begins the speech in familiar territory, describing how the global economic crisis has increased Black entry into the class struggle. "The crisis," he declares, "has affected with particular force the millions of super-exploited Negroes in both Africa and the Americas. It has aggravated unemployment, wage cuts and speed-up among the Negro workers and accelerated the expropriation and ruination of Negro peasantry."[79] This account of accelerating exploitation

[78] V. Chattopsdhaya, "The First International Conference of Negro Workers," *The Negro Worker* Vol. 3, Special Number (October 15 1930): 2.
[79] George Padmore, "Report and Resolution on the Economic Struggles and Tasks of Negro Workers," The Negro Worker Vol. 3, Special Number (October 15, 1930): 4.

and dispossession appears to set the stage, as had theretofore been typical in ITCUNW discourse, for a rhetorical pivot to the growing ranks of the Black proletariat as agents of revolution. This time, however, Padmore adds a significant qualification:

> The predominant mass of Negroes are however still tied to the land, where they live under semi-slave conditions, mercilessly exploited by the imperialists, landlords, and their henchmen in the agrarian districts --- usurers, native chieftains, etc. Politically and socially the Negro toiling peasants are as much oppressed and discriminated against than Negro workers, and in some case[sic] even more.
> Without a mobilization of this mass of Negro toilers the Negro industrial proletariat can not hope to successfully carry on its struggles for the overthrow of imperialism.[80]

Padmore goes on to outline how colonial industrial workers might establish connections with agricultural workers "in the villages," thus mobilizing the "toiling peasants as their class allies and lead[ing] them onward to the final liberation struggle."[81] It is thus only the "revolutionary trade unions which unite the workers of all races on a revolutionary class basis, together with the masses of toiling peasants, organized respectively in tenant leagues, peasant committees, etc., and following the lead of the working class – only such combination of our forces in the struggle against capitalism can assure the victory to the workers."[82] Padmore concludes the speech with a set of resolutions that place new emphasis on agrarian struggles in the colonial periphery. In addition to typical working-class demands for the legalization of trade unions and the establishment of an eight-hour day, he calls for the "formation of peasant organizations to carry on the struggle," "active struggle against all open and concealed forms of slavery and forced labour," and "the return of land to the toiling peasants."[83]

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

"The Economic Struggles of Negro Workers" is noteworthy for several reasons. To be sure, Padmore retains a broadly Leninist understanding of the proletariat as vanguard of revolutionary class struggle. Nonetheless, his analysis is here for the first time substantively focused on the question of how the Black proletariat will forge links with the "predominant mass of Negroes" who are still "tied to the land." The "Negro toiling peasants" are not simply subsumed within the broader category of the working class, nor are they relegated to the status of an anachronism destined for extinction. Instead, the Black peasantry takes form as a vital and concrete constituency whose needs and problems are contemporaneous with those of the industrial working class. Thus, Padmore insists on the need for autonomous forms of peasant organization and incorporates the specific demands of agrarian workers in his list of resolutions. It is evident that this new attention to the peasantry is at least in part a result, much like the tensions noted in Chattopadhaya's report, of the increase in African representation within the ITCUNW. Padmore's mention of the chieftains who serve as "henchman" of imperialists, in particular, indicates that he is now working within an African frame of reference. If it is the case that African farmers pushed the questions of land and agrarian economy onto ITUCNW agenda, however, the emphasis here is on "Negro toiling peasants" as a global phenomenon. The diasporic conglomeration of toilers at the first ITUCNW conference in this way has an effect opposite to the initial intention of its organizers: While the guiding premise of the conference was that "Negroes are no longer step-children in the proletarian family," the event itself occasions a novel articulation of what we might call the "global Black agrarian question." Despite the brevity of the speech, Padmore's posing of this question represents a watershed in the history of Black Labor Internationalism.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of "The Economic Struggles of Negro Workers" is the emphasis it places on the exploitation and oppression of the global Black peasantry. Far from figures of contended self-sufficiency, Padmore's peasants live under "semi-slave conditions" and are "mercilessly exploited" by the imperialists and landlords. At the same time, "the Negro toiling peasants are as much oppressed and discriminated against as Negro workers, and in some cases even more." This account of a coerced and super-exploited Black peasantry marks a break from the romanticism and nostalgia that colored Harlem Renaissance-era depictions of the rural folk. The countryside is not a space of reprieve from urban modernity; the fact that "the predominant mass of Negroes" are "tied to the land" does not imply that they are "planted on the soil" in the cultural organicist sense we associate with Booker T. Washington.[84] Indeed, Padmore's articulation of the global Black agrarian question seems to discard the evolutionary paradigms that animated both conservative and progressive responses to processes of Black urban migration in previous decades. At the same time, by asserting that the toiling peasantry are as much or even more oppressed than industrial Black workers, Padmore overturns the hierarchy of exploitations that undergirds the logic of proletarian vanguardism. The figure of the peasant, that is, no longer marks an earlier "stage" of capitalist development, nor does the severity of their oppression amount to a distortion of the true logic of history. The "semi-slave conditions" that Lenin's earlier writings cast as anachronisms are here treated as contemporaneous with the factory and seem, in fact, to acquire even greater urgency than the quintessentially "modern" form of labor-exploitation.

Of course, Padmore is not deliberately setting out with the grand intention of challenging the rural-urban metanarratives of Marxism or Black modernism but is simply responding as a

[84] Booker T. Washington, "A National Negro Business Address," 1913, in Mark Christian, *Booker T. Washington: A Life in American History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO LLC, 2021), 251.

committed political organizer to a set of material conditions that impose themselves as objective constraints on Marxist praxis at the dawn of the 1930s. Padmore is not happy that the "predominant mass of Negroes" are "tied to the land." Rather, the latter is a social and economic fact that impresses itself upon him, and in turn takes form in his thought as a concrete political and organizational problem. The "Economic Struggles of Negro Workers" is, in other words, effort to "bend theory to the facts" within the constraints of an ideological apparatus which remains broadly committed to the advanced-backwards axiology of proletarian vanguardism. The gap between the *narratological* and the *strategic* components of Padmore's speech is illustrative: While organized rhetorically by the horizon of proletarian expectation, the pragmatic thrust of Padmore's speech is to recommend strategic adaptations to the conditions of subjects who deviate from that horizon. This rhetorical tension helps to explain why a commitment to empirical data over and against sweeping historical synthesis became a defining feature of Padmore's career. Beginning with the conference of 1930, Padmore repeatedly encounters an impasse between a theoretical discourse that claims to discern an overarching historical logic of proletarian class formation working beyond and beneath the surface of the various "distorted" and "impure" forms, and, on the other hand, an expanding conglomeration of Black colonial subjects whose struggles have not "yet" been subsumed within that logic. Lenin's distractions, impurities and distortions are, for Padmore, the primary objects of analysis. Padmore's toiler might indeed be understood as the figural designation of a conceptually impure space where the vestiges and "trappings" of apparently illogical contingencies confront the "logic" of capital's global expansion.[85] The toiler is itself an impure and unwieldy category, one which tends to

[85] Gavin Walker argues that "we must understand concretely the contamination of 'intercourse' between the historical and the logical in the social relation called 'capital,' in order to understand the limits and possibilities of postcolonial studies." See "The Postcolonial and the Politics of the Outside," 5.

splinter off into various subdivisions. The toiling peasantry, the “semi-proletarians” of the Caribbean, the “helots” and “serfs” of the U.S. South and Africa:[86] In all of these instances, the figure of the worker or the proletarian appears insufficient, not because the capitalist mode of production is absent, but precisely because capitalist exploitation is “enmeshed” in political-economic structures generally understood to be characteristic of “earlier” historical stages.

The first signs of Padmore’s “heterodoxic realism” thus appear, not in his post-WWII tribute to Lenin, but in his own efforts to come to terms with the distinctive political and social dynamics shaping the imperial accumulation of global Black labor power. Padmore’s analyses throughout the 1930s tends to focus not on an already-formed proletarian class strata but instead on what Rosa Luxemburg, earlier in the century, called the “incessant transition from non-capitalist to capitalist conditions of labor power.”[87] Luxemburg observed in *The Accumulation of Capital* that what Marx had called “primitive accumulation” was now unfolding again on a global scale. In their efforts to obtain labor power in the colonies, Luxemburg writes, imperial powers adopted “all possible methods of ‘gentle compulsion,’” creating “the most peculiar combinations between the modern wage system and primitive authority in the colonial countries.”[88] To scan the pages of *The Negro Worker* is to confront a global proliferation of such “peculiar combinations.” In a 1930 essay called “Life Among Negro Farmers in America” Padmore documents “white ruling class terrorism” in the U.S. Black Belt, explaining how the “the most brutal and demoralizing form of economic exploitation”—the peonage system—compelled emancipated slaves to “enter a sort of feudal contract relationship which bound them

[86] For “semi-proletariat” see Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U., 1931), 57. The term “serf” appears throughout *The Negro Worker* and in the section on the Southern U.S. in *The Life and Struggle*s, 46. Padmore incorporates “Helot” into his lexicon in *How Britain Rules Africa,* 62, 162.
[87]Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 342.

[88] Ibid., 343-344.

to the land like serfs."[89] The "unfinished bourgeois revolution" in the Black Belt had already been extensively discussed within the context of COMINTERN debates around the U.S. Negro Question, prompting Harry Haywood to pursue his influential analysis of African Americans as a "nation within a nation."[90] What distinguished the ITCUNW was the effort to reframe the "semi-slavery" of African Americans within a global proliferation of such intermediary "combined" forms of exploitation. While Haywood's Black Belt thesis situated the unfinished bourgeois revolution within a U.S. national trajectory of economic development, Padmore broadened the scale, revealing continuities and resonances between forms of coercion in the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa. This made possible a comparison between what Haywood had called the "shadow of the plantation" and the novel forms of coercion that colonial administrators had implemented in the age of the New Imperialism.[91]

This broadening of the geographic scale of analysis prompted, in turn, new idioms of historical comparison. In the wake of the 1930 conference, Padmore increasingly deployed the figure of the slave as an historical reference point to make legible the continuities of coercion across space and time in the Black Atlantic. Padmore's *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, the pamphlet that "set out his career as revolutionary leader of the Black world," is not normally considered in connection with such influential 1930s studies of New World slavery as *Black Reconstruction* or *The Black Jacobins*.[92] Yet it can be argued that it was Padmore's text, rather than Du Bois' and James' classic studies, that inaugurated the effort to recenter the figure of the

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[89] Padmore, "Life Among Negro Farmers in America," *The Negro Worker* 3.7 (May 1, 1930): 12.

[90] Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 227–35.

[91] Ibid., 232.

[92] James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*, 36.

slave in narratives of capitalist modernity. Indeed, James' and Du Bois' later efforts to recast the New World slave as a proto-proletarian revolutionary agent are anticipated—albeit in inverted form—by Padmore's analogy of contemporaneous forms of Black labor to slavery.[93] Padmore deploys the historical analogy in the final section of the text:

> It was the fate of the Negro Workers to pay the horrible tribute to slavery, which served to destroy millions upon millions of black toilers. The negro workers even today are actually slave-bound to their white conquerors. Different forms of forced labor, peonage, expropriation of their lands, extraordinary laws and unbearably heavy taxes, lynchings, segregation, etc., etc., are up till now the fast of the Negro toiling masses languishing under the yoke of imperialism. Tens of thousands of Negro workers are still groaning under the lash of their enslavers.[94]

Here and throughout *The Life and Struggles*, the figure of the slave hovers between the metaphoric and the literal. It is, indeed, difficult to distinguish between Padmore's "figurative" or analogic and simply descriptive deployments of the term. In some cases, Padmore seems to intend "slave" as a technical designation, as in the account of the Firestone Company's employment of slaves in Liberia and in the discussion of the "slave camps" assembled by the turpentine industry in Southern Florida.[95] In the case of Liberia, Padmore stresses that "actual slavery exists."[96] The humanitarian crisis of slavery in Liberia had indeed already drawn the attention of British humanitarian organizations and the League of Nations, and Padmore makes use of British liberals' research in his own analysis. Yet while marshaling the evidence compiled by a League of Nations commission, Padmore also critiques the Leagues' obfuscation of the role of American imperialism in the slavery problem. "As was to be expected," he writes, "the

[93] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 55–83; C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint l'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, Second edition, revised (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc, 1989), 86.
[94] Padmore, *The Life and Struggles*, 122.

[95] Ibid., 68, 50.

[96] Ibid., 70.

commissioners entirely exonerated the American imperialists for the part they played in recruiting forced labour."[97] By erasing Firestone Co.'s employment of forced labor, the League provides the U.S. with the "pretext for assuming still great political control over the republic in the form of a protectorate."[98]

Padmore's critique of the League of Nations underlines the larger political stakes of his argument that "negro workers even today are actually slave-bound to their white conquerors." As Adom Getachew observes, the League of Nations' attempt to separate the humanitarian scandal of slavery in Liberia and Ethiopia from imperial labor regimes was part of a larger project of historical whitewashing: "Within the league…European empires were largely absolved of past and present involvement with slavery, and slavery itself was disconnected from colonial labor and cast as an atavistic holdover in backward societies."[99] *The Life and Struggles* rejects not only the deliberate mystification of imperial responsibility for contemporary slavery but also the larger set of ideological antimonies that underwrite this mystification. By situating contemporary slavery within a larger survey of imperial dispossession and exploitation, Padmore troubles the opposition between "atavistic holdovers" and "modern" regime of colonial labor that allows the League to represent the Liberia crisis as an isolated humanitarian scandal. In his refusal to neatly distinguish between slavery and colonial labor writ large, Padmore allows for comparison across geographic space, revealing continuities (for example) between peonage in the U.S. South and labor coercion in Africa. At the same time, he also seeks to foster consciousness of continuity across time: His argument that even today Black toilers are "slave-bound to their white

[97] Ibid., 71.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 53.

conquerors" places old and new imperialisms in a historical comparative framework, debunking liberal representations of imperial expansion as a force of progress.

One significant consequence of Padmore's effort to wrest the figure of the slave from imperial hagiography is a systematic undermining of any straightforward opposition between "coercion" and "wage-labor."[100] Indeed, Padmore often invokes the figure of the slave precisely when discussing processes of Black proletarianization. Echoing Eric Walrond's use of "peon" to describe Black Canal Zone workers, Padmore in one passage of *The Live and Struggles* notes a resemblance between the transatlantic slave trade and American imperialists' importation of migrant Black workforces to work on banana plantations in Colombia and Honduras.[101] Here the figure of the slave is clearly intended as an analogue rather than a literal descriptor. At the same time, it should be noted that the difference between Padmore's literal and analogic uses of the term lies not in the presence, or even in the degree, of coercion, but instead in the different ways coercion is deployed to compel labor. Padmore tends to reserve literal usages of "slave" for severe restrictions of mobility at the point of production, i.e., the workers who were lured to the turpentine camps in Florida and forced to work against their will under the threat of armed guards.[102] More often, however, Padmore describes "forced labor" as one aspect of a systematic effort on the part of an imperial power to induce dependence on the colonial economy. In a section on forced labor in British West Africa, Padmore recounts how, through a combination of land annexation and taxation, the colonial government compels the natives to either work for foreign capitalists or borrow money from the banks. "In this way," notes Padmore, "the

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[100] This aspect of Padmore's analysis bears comparison with Jairus Banaji's argument against reifying an opposition between free and unfree labor under capitalism. See Banaji, *Theory as History*, 145.

[101] Padmore, *The Life and Struggles,* 62.

[102] Ibid., 50.

imperialists are able to create a 'free labor market and thereby get labor for their plantations and mines."[103] Elsewhere he observes a tendency to "expropriate the lands from the natives and turn the peasantry into a landless class of wage-earners, enslaved on the plantations of the white overlords."[104] In these passages, "free wage labor" and coercion are not opposed but coextensive: The situation of the toiler is one that troubles the distinction between the two.

Padmore's analysis in this way demonstrates that the global expansion of capitalism relentlessly generates the impurities and distortions that Lenin wanted to relegate to the status of a "moribund remnant." At the same time, the proliferation of figures of labor in Padmore's writings suggests increasingly heterogenous modalities of struggle at the frontiers of imperialist-capitalism. On one hand, *The Lives and Struggles* shows capital harnessing the coercive apparatus of the state to mobilize Black labor power on an ever-expanding scale; yet these new deployments of coercion do not establish a homogenous or universal path of entry into a global working class, but instead articulate in complex ways with already existing social structures. The very need to coerce workers in the periphery, as Luxemburg had argued, proves that "capitalist production cannot manage without labour power from other social organizations."[105] The expanding accumulation of global labor had also broadened the theater of anti-capitalist resistance: Depending on where one looked, Black resistance might take the form of an organized workers' strike or, as Padmore's surveys repeatedly indicate, as mass resistance to the process of proletarianization itself. It is the latter that preoccupies Padmore in the section of *The Lives and Struggles* called "the Awakening of Negro Toilers." There, he discusses among other

[103] Ibid., 24.

[104] Ibid., 27.

[105] Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital,* 344.

instances of resistance the peasant uprising in Nigeria, in which "30,000 women organized monster demonstrations against British imperialist and their agents"; the peasant organization called Lakho-La-Baffo in Basutoland, whose "warlike traditions have been a thorn in the flesh of the British imperialists"; and the Sierra Leone peasant movement organized by the Moslem leader Hyadara, who called upon peasants to "refuse to pay their Hut taxes and to drive the British officials away from the province."[106] These are hardly the actions of an organized working-class concentrated in industry. Instead, they are uprisings of the rural interior, harnessing preexisting social structures and "traditions" to resist the imperial expropriation of lands and tax regimes. This summary of peasant uprisings towards the end of *The Life and Struggles* presages a decisive pivot towards African agrarian economies in Padmore's later work.

In the imperial center, meanwhile, organized labor appeared increasingly reluctant to perform the historic mission its more "advanced" exploitation was meant to guarantee. Even while Black toilers were increasingly subject to the most brutal forms of super-exploitation and "primitive authority," the intensification of inter-imperial conflict created the foundation for a series of compromises between labor and capital in the metropole. The violent accumulation and coercion of labor in one sphere was, as Padmore well knew, structurally related to its nationalist cooptation in the other. "It is also necessary for the workers of the capitalist countries to understand," he argues, echoing Lenin's account of the labor-aristocracy, "that it is only through the exploiting of the colonial workers, from whose sweat and blood super-profits are extorted, that the imperialists are able to bribe the reformists and social-fascist trade union bureaucrats and thereby enable them to betray the struggles of the workers."[107] Imperialism was in this way at

[106] Padmore, *The Lives and Struggles*, 88-97.

[107] Ibid., 6.

once the foundation and the saboteur of global working-class unity. After his acrimonious split with the COMINTERN, Padmore began to integrate his research into a more fully developed account of the class struggle in colonial Africa. At the same time, however, he was forced to contend with the dissolution of the most powerful internationalist counterweight to reformist European labor parties—a betrayal whose consequences were cast into sharp relief by Abyssinian crisis. In the political vacuum left by the ITCUNW, Padmore found himself in a paradoxical position: On one hand, a stalwart defender of working-class internationalism against the rising nationalist tide of the popular front era; On the other, a leading proponent of anticolonial struggle as a national struggle, unbound by the rigidities of the COMINTERN's "class-against-class" doctrine. It is this duality that would seem to inform C.L.R. James' later assessment of Padmore as the embodiment of a "theoretical and practical Marxism for Africa, a Marxism purged of the contemporary corruption."[108]

*Fascism as Dispossession*

The first decisive rift between Black Labor Internationalism and the COMINTERN occurred when Padmore, upon learning that the Kremlin had decided to close the ITCUNW, resigned his post in Hamburg and transplanted to London. The Soviet Union's decision to disband the ITCUNW reflected the new priorities of the Popular Front policy, implemented in response to Hitler's seizure of power. With the transition from the "Third Period" to the Popular Front Era, the Soviet Union now called for coalitions with nonsocialist governments, including those of the "democratic imperialist" nations, to combat the spread of fascism. This shift meant

[108] James, "Notes on the Life of George Padmore," 294.

two things: An abandonment of the policy of supporting and fomenting the internal class struggle within Europe in favor of national alliances against the fascist threat; and a new willingness to sacrifice anticolonial movements if and when necessary to form such alliances.[109] If this betrayal meant that the COMINTERN could no longer serve as the organizational center Black Labor Internationalism, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 catalyzed a remobilization and rearticulation of this tendency in the burgeoning anticolonial public sphere of London. The Italian invasion, Padmore wrote, "has acted like dynamite in arousing and consolidating racial solidarity among Africans, and peoples of African descent, as never before. Blacks throughout the world—in Africa, North, South and Central Americas, the West Indies, and Europe—have rallied to the defence of Ethiopia, as though they were the subjects of the Emperor, Haile Selassie."[110] During his time in the ITCUNW Padmore had cultivated an expansive transnational network of Black workers, labor leaders and anticolonial nationalists across the diaspora. He now continued to nurture and expand these connections in London while serving on the executive committee of the International African Friends of Ethiopia, founded by C.L.R. James in Amy Ashwood Garvey's Florence Mill Social Parlour. When the IAFE disbanded a group of members came together and founded the International African Service Bureau in 1937, adopting as its motto "Educate, Co-operate, Emancipate. Neutral in nothing affecting the African people."[111]

The disproportionate involvement of West Indian writers and activists in the interwar African anticolonial movement has elicited divergent interpretations. In the 1963 Appendix to

[109] See C. L. R. James and Christian Høgsbjerg, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, The C. L. R. James Archives (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[110] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 363.

[111] Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 199–213.

*The Black Jacobins* C.L.R. James narrativized West Indian interwar efforts on behalf of African emancipation as a "stage in the development of the West Indian quest for national identity."[112] James' account in the Appendix, grounded in part in an interpretation of the Négritude movement, conceived the West Indian preoccupation with Africa as arising from a deep psychological necessity: "*Before they could begin to see themselves as a free and independent people they had to clear from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded.* The road to West Indian national identity lay through Africa."[113] Walter Rodney, reflecting on the career of James, offers a more explicitly historical-materialist explanation. West Indian Pan-Africanism, he suggests, derives from the "incontrovertibly international character of white racism, and the situation of African peoples as integral parts of the international political economy."[114] African-descended people in the New World, he argues, have historically been compelled to pursue research on Africa in order to combat "white mythology." This imperative acquired a new urgency when Africa was brought under colonial rule and the forms of racism which had grown out of New World slavery were extended to the continent.[115] Pan-Africanism is on this account a dialectical counterpart to the internationalization of anti-Black racism: "Pan-Africanism is not simply a unity of colour, it is also a unity of common condition and one that

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[112] C.L.R. James, "Appendix: From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro" in *The Black Jacobins*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1963), 396.

[113] Ibid., 402.

[114] Walter Rodney, "The African Revolution" in *Urgent Tasks* 12 (Summer 1981), http://www.sojournertruth.net/rodney.html

[115] Ibid.

retains its validity because the dominant group in the international political economy continue to define things in racist terms for their own convenience."[116]

Beyond the psychological imperative to combat racial stigma, Rodney argues, West Indians' focusing of revolutionary efforts on Africa has a more calculated and strategic logic: "At the level of organization, it is a common enough principle that unity and the enlargement of scale must be brought to bear against the enemy. It is logical enough, too, that one must maximize strong points, so the freeing of the African continent itself became the first priority of for politically active West Indians who knew the limitations of their own societies and knew that the weakness of Africa contributed to indignity and low status abroad."[117] Rodney's historical-materialist explanation for the African focus of interwar West Indian activism resonates more closely with Padmore's own contemporaneous reflections on the topic. Padmore's post-COMINTERN writings suggest that his increasing prioritization of the African struggle was at least in part motivated by a sober analysis the continent's position in the world imperial order. Lenin's *Imperialism* had identified the partition of Africa as a threshold in the transition to the monopoly stage of capitalism, noting that "when nine tenths of Africa had been seized…there was inevitably ushered in period of colonial monopoly and, consequently, a period of particularly intense struggle for the division and the redivision of the world."[118] Africa's position as the new colonial frontier meant that it could potentially play a central and even vanguard role in the struggle for world revolution. "It is here," wrote Padmore, "that the economic and political interests of all the Western European powers—Great Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal,

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 124.

Spain, and even America converge." Therefore, he predicted, "There can be no doubt about it, Africa is destined to play a great and decisive role in international affairs in the near future."[119] The founding of the IASB catalyzed what Adom Getachew calls a "revival of Pan-Africanism as a distinctive internationalism" in which "colonized subjects, rather than the metropolitan proletariat, were the key agents of global transformation."[120] Indeed, this revival of Pan-Africanism at the same time represented a new transmutation of Black Labor Internationalism. While campaigning against imperialist aggression in Africa and fostering the cadres of future African independence movements, the IASB's journal International African Opinion continued to situate the African anticolonial struggle within a transatlantic context of Black labor organization and resistance. James' introductory editorial in the first 1938 issue of the journal announced its aim to be "the mouthpiece of the black workers and peasants, and those intellectuals who see the necessity of making the cause of the masses their own."[121] The IAO covered the Caribbean labor rebellions and African American struggles such as the Scottsboro Campaign as well as anticolonial movements in Africa.[122]

The IAO also, like *The Negro Worker*, promoted Black radical literature, publishing poems by both Langston Hughes and lesser-known Caribbean writers such as J.R. Ralph Casimir and Alfred M. Cruickshank. The verse that appeared in the IAO combined Pan-Africanism with labor themes, creating a merger between distinct streams of Black Atlantic politics. Casimir's "O Africa," a hymn to be sung to the tune of "Jerusalem my happy home," echoed the religiously

[119] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 8.

[120] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 67.

[121] C.L.R. James, "Editorial," *International African Opinion* 1.1 (July, 1938): 2.

[122] See for example George Padmore, "Labour Unrest in Jamaica," *IAO* 1.1 (July, 1938): 6 and coverage of the Scottsboro trial in *IAO* 1.2 (August 1938).

infused nationalism of the Marcus Garvey movement.[123] Cruickshank's "Trinidad—1938" harnessed the conventions of counter-pastoral to juxtapose the fantasy of a tropical Caribbean idyl with the brutality of labor conditions in the islands' sugar and oil industries.[124] Cruickshank's adoption of the counter-pastoral was characteristic of a broader Pan-African rhetorical strategy wherein writers appropriated British genres and tropes to address the struggles of African-descended peoples. James drew attention in his introductory editorial to the centenary of the British Chartist movement, predicting that "the achievement by the colonial blacks of the demands of the Chartists will ultimately lay the basis and create the possibility of a wider struggle for the ultimate aim."[125] With this parallelism James figured Black colonial labor struggles as, on one hand, replicating the "democratic" revolution of an earlier stage of British labor history and at the same time as propelling global labor forward towards the "ultimate aim" –presumably, socialism.

Padmore and James' efforts to foster a Pan-African anticolonial movement autonomous from the COMINTERN and the Trotskyite Fourth International might appear to indicate a general transition from a politics oriented around "class" or labor to the politics of nationalism. Yet to describe the evolution of James and Padmore's thinking in these terms would occlude their continued investment at once in fostering Pan-African labor movements and in forcing metropolitan labor to contend with the colonial question. James and Padmore in these years were fighting on two fronts simultaneously. On one hand, they sought to place the working classes at the center of Pan-Africanism; on the other, they brought the fight against imperialism and racial

[123] J.R.R. Casimir "O Africa," *IAO* 1.7 (May-June 1939): 5.

[124] Alfred M. Cruickshank, "Trinidad-1938," *IAO* 1.4 (October 1938).

[125] James, "Editorial," *IAO* 1.1 (July 1938): 2.

oppression to the center of the global class struggle.[126] In his opening editorial for IAO James declared that "one of our most important tasks is to make clear to the black intellectuals and other members of the middle-class, that in the present state if world affairs there is no way out for them by seeking crumbs from the tables of their imperialist masters. They must identify themselves with the struggles of the masses."[127] On the other front, Padmore waged a relentless campaign of persuasion aimed at British left and labor parties. Padmore's editorials in the Independent Labor Party's *New Leader* asserted the shared interests of British and colonial workers: "To conceive of getting rid of the capitalists without smashing up the Empire is like trying to make the omelet without smashing the egg. It therefore follows that the colonial peoples are the potential allies of the workers against a coming enemy—The British Imperialist class."[128] On the eve of World War II, Padmore address European workers as a whole in the IAO: "Our freedom is a step towards your freedom. In the common effort for the independence of the colonial peoples and the emancipation of the European workers, the black and white workers will ride humanity of the scourge of Imperialism and open a new future for humanity."[129]

*How Britain Rules Africa*, Padmore's first post-COMINTERN treatise and his most trenchant salvo against "Labor Imperialism" in the metropole, is framed by a powerful polemic: Fascism, whose ascendance had propelled the COMINTERN's abandonment of the colonies,

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[126] Kent Worcester describes James' politics as "Class Struggle Pan-Africanism." See Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography*, SUNY Series, Interruptions -- Border Testimony(Ies) and Critical Discourse/s (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*; Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1964*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1993); Christian Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, C. L. R. James Archives (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014).

[127] James, "Editorial," 2.

[128] Padmore, "Hands Off the Colonies!," *New Leader* (February 25, 1938), transc. Christian Hogsbjerg. https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1938/hands-off.htm

[129] Padmore, "Manifesto Against War," *IAO* 1.4 (October 1938).

was itself an outgrowth of colonialism. "[W]e maintain," he writes, "that the Colonies are the breeding-ground for the type of fascist mentality which is being let loose in Europe today."[130] The working class of England "cannot beat back fascism at home and at the same time continue to be indifferent to the intolerable conditions of the overwhelming majority of the coloured peoples of the Empire who inhabit colonial lands."[131] That fascism was imperialist in origins and intent was made obvious by Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and by the Nazis' connections to German colonial forces.[132] However, Padmore refused the moral distinction between "democratic-imperialist" and Fascist nations drawn by the COMINTERN's Popular Front policy. "What difference is there," he asked, "between the racial philosophy of Britons in East Africa and the Nazis in Germany?"[133] Padmore's insistence on the comparability of British imperialism and fascism sought to undermine the rationale for socialists' tactical alliances with democratic-imperialist nations. His argument more generally sought to expose the myopia of a British left that circumscribed its political agenda to the national sphere. Padmore's claim that the metropolitan working class had to support colonial struggles in order to beat back fascism essentially reiterated a line he had advanced since *The Life and Struggles*, although now it was implicitly advanced against rather than in support of COMINTERN policy: "Again, there is a pronounced tendency among Labour politicians in England to talk about British capitalism as something that is hermetically sealed up in what is known as the British Isles. This is

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[130] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 4.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 3.

[133] Ibid., 130.

fundamentally incorrect. British imperialism is world-wide in scope."[134] The notion that the struggle against fascism could be won without challenging the empire was fatal not only for colonial peoples but also for the workers' movement. Echoing Marx's dictum, Padmore declared that "The fight against fascism cannot be separated from the right of all colonial peoples and subject races to self-determination. For any people who help keep another people in slavery are at the same time forging their own chains."[135]

Padmore's invocation of slavery in his opening exhortation sets the stage for sustained analysis of the relation between fascism and colonial regimes of labor control. Indeed, throughout *How Britain Rules Africa*, Padmore refuses to extricate the barbarity of colonial fascism from the political economy of imperialism. In the introduction Padmore establishes that Africa "serves as an agrarian hinterland for the industrialized West, a source of supply for raw materials, a market for manufactured commodities" and an "outlet for European settlers."[136] Padmore introduces the text as an exposé, a catalogue of "every conceivable crime which we are wont to associate with imperialism."[137] Yet in the same breath he categorically refutes liberal conceptions of imperial crimes as temporary excesses or exceptions to a benevolent norm. Among the crimes perpetrated by the British empire, none is more "revolting," he declares, "than the ruthless and shameful methods white settlers have adopted in robbing Natives of their best lands and then forcing them through various devices, chiefly taxation, to go and work for them.

[134] Ibid., 4.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid., 1.

[137] Ibid., 2.

For what is land to white men in tropical Africa without black labour?"[138] In the sections that follow Padmore hammers home this theme of empire's demand for labor with punishing repetitiveness, as though intoning a slogan for rallies in Hyde Park: The basic sequence of taxation, land alienation, and labor-coercion is recapitulated serially, with varied modifications and emphases, in each of the text's case-studies. "Land, taxation and labour are the three inseparable issues which face the Blacks in every country peopled by white immigrant races," Padmore notes in the section on Kenya.[139] Here and in the introductory comments about the "ruthless and shameful methods of white settlers," Padmore distinguishes between instances of what scholars now call "settler-colonialism" and the colonies and protectorates under British administration with minimal white settler populations.[140] Indeed, while the land-taxation-labor triad appears in all areas under British control, the settler colonies acquire a certain rhetorical preeminence in Padmore's text, emblematizing the rapacity and the violence of the resource demands that propel imperial expansion across the continent. It is, unsurprisingly, in the settler-colonial formations—particularly Kenya and South Africa—that Padmore sees the essentially *fascistic* nature of imperialism laid bare.

The phrase "Colonial Fascism" appears first towards the end of Padmore's section on Kenya, capping off a meticulous history of what he calls the "land question."[141] It is the latter, he claims, "which is *the* problem in Kenya," the foundation of the "conflict of interests between the

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[138] Ibid., 3.

[139] Ibid., 104.

[140] Hyung Gu Lynn --, et al. *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini. The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017, Mahmood Mamdani, "Settler Colonialism: Then and Now," *Critical Inquiry* 41.3 (Spring 2015): 596-614.

[141] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa,* 125.

various races and the danger arising therefrom."[142] Beginning with Britain's annexation of Kenya in 1895, Padmore traces the evolution of British colonization policy, highlighting a 1902 Crown Lands' Ordinance which allowed commissioner Sir Charles Eliot to lease lands to Europeans. This sets in motion a "system of land-grabbing" which, through a combination of forced dispossession and cajolery, has transformed "hundreds of thousands of formerly independent black agriculturalists and herdsmen into a landless proletariat."[143] Native agitation against dispossession, particularly the revolt led by Harry Thuku, led to a new series commissions culminating in a 1930 law suspending further land transfers as well as the creation of Reserves. (The latter, Padmore clarifies, are not properties of the natives, who are mere "tenants of the will of the Government.")[144] The discovery of gold two years later led to a new bill amending the 1930 ordinance, allowing the alienation of land once again for the "development of mineral resources." Lambasting a speech in the House of Commons declaring the new bill to be "primarily in the interests of the natives," Padmore insists on the contrary that it is "tantamount to wholesale murder, for a landless agricultural and pastoral race is bound to disintegrate and perish." [145]

The land question forms the basis, in turn, of the "labour problem." With imperial policy favoring European settlement and land-tenure in the reserves becoming increasingly precarious, natives are compelled to become "squatters on land owned by white settlers."[146] New labor

[142] Ibid., 100-101.

[143] Ibid., 101.

[144] Ibid., 104-105.

[145] Ibid., 109
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[146] Ibid., 112.

ordinances are passed tethering squatters' rights to employment by European farmers. Natives are now forced to carry a "Kipandi" around their necks containing owners' fingerprints and a record indicating the number of days worked within the year– a "badge of servitude in their own country."[147] Natives forced out of the reserves contribute to an expanding reservoir of labor for British colonial capital. Padmore weaves a critique of white-man's-burden platitudes into his narrative, mobilizing commissioners' memorandums and parliamentary speeches to demonstrate the British government's collusion with colonial capitalists: "Nothing shows so clearly the true capitalist character of the Government which pretends to be guardian of Native rights, as its policy of collaboration with the planters on the question of securing labor."[148] In support of this argument for government complicity Padmore draws attention to memorandum circulated by a commissioner encouraging local officials to pressure natives to work; the implementation of a rigid tax policy; and the use of flogging to punish disobedient workers.[149] The reference to Colonial Fascism appears in a section called "Labour Regulations." There Padmore details the colonial state's outlawing of trade-union organization and collective bargaining, the absence of social legislation such as unemployment benefits and pensions, and a battery of ordinances, such as the Masters and Servants Act, stipulating draconian punishments for breach of contract.[150] Padmore offers two analogies for this situation, one historical and one contemporary: The Jews of Europe and chattel slavery. The two arrive almost simultaneously in the final paragraph of the section, forming a symbolic unity of past and present: "The Africans have as much liberty in

[147] Ibid., 113.

[148] Ibid., 117.

[149] Ibid., 122.

[150] Ibid., 123.

Kenya as the Jews in Germany…Chattel slavery as it existed in the nineteenth century has been abolished, but many of the practices of the past hang heavy on the present. The conditions under which the Blacks live in Kenya can without exaggeration be described as Colonial Fascism."[151]

That the phrase "Colonial Fascism" appears first in a section primarily focused on "labor regulations," and in connection with the history of enslavement, is revealing: It suggests an important, and perhaps distinctive, aspect of Padmore's polemical reworking of the fascism concept. In Padmore's account, fascism is a direct corollary to the processes of dispossession and labor-compulsion that integrate the African "hinterland" into imperial value chains. It is then, we might say, not a "state of exception" but a rule, a tendency immanent to the expansion of global capitalism.[152] The "regime of white dictatorship" that Padmore analyzes, culminating in his deployment of the concept "colonial fascism," is no more nor less than an improvised amalgam of legal instruments for the dispossession, subjugation, and control of the native population. Indeed, the twin analogies "Jews in Germany" and "Chattel Slavery" bookend a paragraph which is itself simply an extended catalogue of laws and ordinances used to ensure the native Africans' compliance with the dictates of capital. In this regard Padmore's deployment of the fascism concept resonates with the legal scholar Nasser Hussain's critique of Giorgio Agamben's reading of the "state of exception": Rather than a suspension of prior constitutional liberties, colonial

[151] Ibid., 124-125.

[152] Padmore was not alone in this reworking of the fascism concept. As Robin D.G. Kelley observes, "radical black intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R James, George Padmore, and Oliver Cox, understood fascism not as some aberration from the march of progress, an unexpected right-wing turn, but a logical development of Western Civilization itself. They viewed fascism as a blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted not only in capitalist political economy but racist ideologies that were already in place at the dawn of modernity." What strikes me as potentially distinctive about Padmore's approach is his deconstruction of the legal apparatus of Colonial Fascism. See Robin D.G. Kelley, "Introduction" to Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, transl. Joan Pinkham, ed., Robin D.G. Kelley (New York: Mnothly Review, 2000), 25-6.

fascism involves an “intensification of an administrative and bureaucratic legality.”[153] Indeed, we might take this a step further and observe that, by situating the idea of fascism within the triad of land alienation, taxation, and labor-coercion, Padmore pushes against an understanding of fascism as extermination or exclusion of unwanted populations and recasts it as a mechanism for the *inclusion* of the colonies in the global economy. Colonial Fascism appears in this context not as a deviation from a liberal-democratic norm but as the social mechanism that facilitates what Getachew calls “unequal integration.” Fascism is on this account a process of interpellation by capital, a “partial and burdened form of inclusion” that simultaneously incorporates new territories into a global imperial system and “endow[s] them with an international personality that mak[es] possible their domination.”[154] The Kipandi is an apt symbol for the burdened and racialized form of inclusion that the British empire imposed on the people of Kenya: By redefining natives’ rights to occupy their own former lands as contingent upon fulfillment of a work quota, the Kipandi necklace confers upon the colonized subject an “international personality”—that of the worker—that secures their domination.[155]

In conceiving Colonial Fascism as a modality of unequal integration, Padmore diverges sharply from contemporaneous understandings of fascism as an atavistic reaction against the universalizing logic of capitalism. His argument nearly inverts Karl Polanyi’s conception of fascism as an attempt to counterpose a “militarized organic community against the self-regulating market.”[156] If Polanyi’s diagnosis of European fascism focused on the effort to

[153] Nasser Hussain, “Beyond Norm and Exception: Guantánamo,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 74.

[154] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 18.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Nikhil Pal Singh offers a useful commentary on Polanyi’s and other interwar analyses of fascism. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America’s Long War* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 110.

"denaturalize" the individual subject of liberal market society and reform capitalism into a nationalist-corporative and autocratic system, Padmore defines colonial fascism as something more like capitalism's frontier:[157] Not a racial organicist negation of free market individualism, then, but the assemblage of violent practices of dispossession and control harnessed by capital in the effort to mobilize colonial labor power. The function of racism within Colonial Fascism is thus paradoxical. As Padmore explains in the section on South Africa, the regime of racial terror and segregation upheld by the British and Boer settlers is the most brutal in the world, with natives subjected to "worse forms of racial discrimination and persecution than the Jews in fascist Germany."[158] When describing the Boer settlers' belief in the divinely ordained superiority of white over Black, Padmore adopts the Hitlerian notion of *Weltanschauung* or "worldview": This white supremacist conviction is a "A divine and unalterable pre-determination upon which the whole ideological superstructure of social relationship between the two races in South Africa has been developed."[159] The Boers in this sense appear as aspirational Nazis, imagining themselves as an organic racial community in opposition to the despised Black native. Yet the Germany-South Africa analogy runs into a limit which is equally revealing about the structural imperatives driving Colonial Fascism:

> The only difference between the German Jews and the South African Natives is this: whereas the Jews constitute only a small national minority, occupying positions chiefly in the learned professions, art, theatre, literature, industry and commerce, the Blacks not only form the overwhelming majority of the population in South Africa, but their labour-power is the very life-blood of the country's economic system. They are so indispensable that gold-mining shares are even known as Kaffirs on the stock markets. Can anybody imagine South Africa existing without them? They plough the fields, they dig the gold and even cook the white man's food. The

[157] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 245. See also Sang Hun Lim, "Look up Rather than down: Karl Polanyi's Fascism and Radical Right-Wing 'Populism.'" Current Sociology, (May 2021).

[158] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* , 160.

[159] Ibid., 161.

European needs the Africans more than the Blacks need the Whites. Were it not so, they would have been systematically exterminated like the aborigines of Australia, or driven away from the country like the Jews in Germany.[160]

Colonial and National Fascisms are thus upheld by discrete racisms: While the latter operates on an eliminationist paradigm, justifying the "murderous function of the state,"[161] the former exemplifies what Etienne Balibar calls the "internal exclusion" of colonial racism, enforcing a regime of racial hierarchy and exclusion which itself serves to regulate and manage the incorporation of native peoples into the economy.[162] By broadening the category of fascism to include these two racial capitalist systems, however, Padmore also encourages his readers—and the British left in particular—to consider their mutual imbrication. Indeed, the broader polemical point here would seem to be that global imperial expansion creates a "boomerang" between colony and metropole, a dialectic between "interiorization of the exterior" and the "exteriorization of the interior"[163]: Padmore makes visible the unity of these discrete processes of racialization, each in their own way trying to resolve the structural crises of global capitalism, each ultimately serving to exacerbate those crises. We might here home in on Padmore's invocation of blood in the passage above as a symbol for the racialization of global capitalism. In describing Black labor-power as the "life-blood" of the South African economy, Padmore constructs a powerful figure for the interfusion of the biological and the economic—the economization of racial difference, on one hand, and the biologizing of the economy, on the

[160] Ibid., 191-192.

[161] Michel Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 1st ed. (New York: Picador, 2003), 256.

[162] Étienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism" in Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 1. publ., [repr.], Radical Thinkers (London: Verso Publ, 2011), 43.

[163] I am here importing Aimé Césaire's notion of the "boomerang effect" of colonialism. See Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism,* 36.

other. The platonic ideal of abstract labor power is visceralized; what Michel Foucault called the "biological-type caesura" of race is reincorporated as a vitalizing element of the economic organism.[164]

How does Colonial Fascism shape the dynamics of class struggle in Africa? On one hand, Colonial Fascism appears in Padmore's text as something like a program of universal proletarianization. The Kipandi, the Masters' and Servants' Act, and the various Bills and ordinances promoting the sale of native' lands are all expressions of capital's need for unfettered accumulation, facilitating the "mobilization of world labor power without restriction."[165] Yet *How Britain Rules Africa* also extends the analysis of the "global Black agrarian question" Padmore initiated in the wake of the 1930 conference. Echoing "The Economic Struggles of Negro Workers," Padmore observes in the South Africa section that "the agricultural laborers, who form the majority of the Native working class, are even worse off than the industrial proletariat. Theirs is a life hardly removed from chattel slavery."[166] The Native Lands act of 1913, by making it illegal for natives to occupy land except as farm workers, drives peasant proprietors to sell their lands and animals to "rich agrarians": "Faced with complete ruin and starvation about 2,000,000 Blacks have been driven into serfdom since 1913."[167] Padmore explains how an amendment to the 1913 law called the "Native Service Contract Act" extends controls over labor tenancy by providing for flogging in cases of breach of contract and tethering farmers' rights to hire native workers to permission from previous employers. This clause thus

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[164] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 255.

[165] Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, 343.

[166] Padmore, *How Britain Rules*, 166.

[167] Ibid., 164.

"gives landlords full and absolute control over the very lives of the Natives. It enables them to tie the Africans in bondage to the land. In other words, the Act legalized serfdom."[168] The extension of colonial control over the South African economy, while on one hand driving proletarianization, appears in this sense more like a process of "feudalization."[169] If in Padmore's earlier writings such forms of agrarian semi-slavery appeared "in spite of" the processes of capitalist development that propelled proletarianization, his analysis here shows these "backwards" and "progressive" aspects of development working in tandem: The analysis of Colonial Fascism in this sense allows Padmore to situate the "distorted" forms of exploitation within the logic of imperial accumulation itself.

*How Britain Rules Africa* concludes with a section called the "Review of the African Labor Movement" in which Padmore identifies three factors to explain the "embryonic stage" of trade union organization across the continent. The three factors are: "(1) A real industrial proletariat divorced from the land and tribal ties has only come into being during the last decade, and this chiefly in the Congo and the territories of Southern Africa; (2), the oppressive racial, political and semi-feudal social conditions under which the Blacks live, and (3), the hostility of white workers and organized labour towards the Africans."[170] While the first factor might seem to imply that an African workers' movement will naturally develop as the historical process of proletarianization advances, the second two factors complicate such an assumption. Here and elsewhere Padmore places great weight on the example of South Africa, treating the latter's

[168] Ibid., 167.

[169] Helen Bradford argues that in rural South Africa "the penetration of capital spawned 'feudal' relations of exploitation and oppression." See Bradford, "Highways, Byways and Cul-de-Sacs: The Transition to Agrarian Capitalism in Revisionist South African History," *Radical History Review* 46.7 (1990): 84.

[170] Ibid., 325.

peculiar and contradictory combination of social forces as a barometer for the development of anti-imperial struggle across the continent. On one hand, the fact that a "real industrial proletariat" has emerged in South Africa would seem to point towards an intensification of class struggle there; yet it is also in South Africa that Colonial Fascism coheres most clearly and violently as a set of strategies for obstructing the crystallization of the proletariat as a viable political force. In the South Africa section Padmore analyzes in great detail how the color bar serves to regulate the accumulation of native labor power, intervening in the putatively "free play" of market forces to create a permanent, excluded Black underclass. "South Africa is one of the few countries in the world," he writes, "where the price of labour is not determined by the capitalist economic law of demand and supply or qualification, but legalized according to race into 'civilized labour' and 'uncivilized labour.'"[171] A law called the Color Bar Act stipulates that higher-skilled jobs be given to whites, meaning, for example, that in the Mining Industry every white miner a occupies a "supervisory position over his Black class brother."[172] By enforcing this racial division of labor, South African capitalism reproduces the dynamics of the global labor aristocracy in miniature. White supremacy creates a "middle-class psychology among the Whites" and "every rank-and-file white worker is a self-appointed little boss in his relationship with the black workers."[173]

Under Colonial Fascism, then, racism is far from a mere ideological supplement to material processes of capitalist development and class formation. The racialization of the economy instead fundamentally overhauls the ideal-typical social roles of the classical Marxist

[171] Ibid., 177.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid., 179.

script. While the recruitment of natives into industry is at the most abstract level a process of proletarianization, the historical logic of Black class formation in South Africa is so intensely mediated by state-sanctioned white supremacy and racial oppression that Padmore grasps for a new term: "In South Africa the Blacks have been turned into helots," he writes, adopting the term for a politically subordinate class of serfs in Ancient Sparta.[174] One of Padmore's central arguments in the South African section is that legally enforced racial hierarchies impede the differentiation of the native population into distinct social classes. The color bar functions as a great racial homogenizer, preventing the emergence of Black bourgeoisie while at the same time defusing the class consciousness of white workers: "It is too late for [the Natives] to hope to create a bourgeoisie of their own, like the 'ghetto' capitalists among the coloured people of America… Therefore, those who tell the Natives that they must fight 'class against class,' and liquidate 'their' bourgeoisie, are simply talking nonsense."[175] Here Padmore articulates the basic principles of the so-called "incomplete crystallization" thesis, attributed elsewhere in this dissertation to Walter Rodney.[176] As Padmore's polemics against the COMINTERN's "class vs. class" line indicate, his discovery of incomplete class differentiation as a tendency of colonial economic development represents a rupture from the dominant theoretical discourse of his time. It is clear from Padmore's phrasing that he understands himself to working against an entrenched set of assumptions: In South Africa, he writes, "class lines in the Marxist sense" have failed to

[174] Ibid., 162. "helot, n.". OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/85734?redirectedFrom=helot (accessed April 06, 2022).

[175] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa,* 162.

[176] Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 8.

develop.[177] Generalizing from the South African case to whole continent, Padmore describes the African situation as a tragic double-bind: "The situation of the African is tragic. On the one hand, the black workers are being ruthlessly exploited by capital, and on the other hand, organized labor slam in their faces the door of economic development. What then is to be done?"[178]

The short version of Padmore's answer to this question is, as is well known, the national liberation struggle: "At the present stage of African social development, their struggle is not one of 'class against class,' but a united liberation struggle of the entire black nation."[179] In the concluding review of the African Labor Movement Padmore predicts that the South African struggle will "assume the form of an Anti-Imperialist Peoples' Democratic Movement of the now subject races against the dominant and privileged minority."[180] When forecasting the African national struggle, Padmore rehashes the question of the transition to socialism. Will the national revolution stop at the "bourgeois-democratic stage?" Of course not. To what extent, however, does the transition from national liberation to socialist revolution depend on events in the metropole? Padmore's approach to this question places *How Britain Rules Africa* somewhere between the certitudes of the COMINTERN era and an emergent understanding of African peoples as autonomous agents of world revolution: "In our opinion it will not, especially if the proletarian revolution occurs in Europe before."[181] This phrasing walks a tightrope between the two positions that we can roughly identify with the two key stages of Padmore's career: The proletarian vanguardism associated with Lenin and the COMINTERN years, and the

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[177] Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa,* 334.

[178] Ibid., 325.

[179] Ibid., 162.

[180]Ibid., 332.

[181] Ibid.

understanding of African liberation movements as primary drivers of world socialist revolution associated with the post-WWII period. Here, Padmore remains committed to fomenting the struggle in both spheres but no longer wishes to subordinate the anticolonial movement to a causal chain in which the primary actant is the metropolitan worker. The proletarian revolution in Europe is not a necessary precondition for African socialism; nonetheless—and we can here imagine the British left as Padmore's primary addressee—the success of the latter is "especially" likely if it occurs after the former. More than anything, this phrasing suggests that the question of historical agency has become indeterminate: While struggles in metropole and colony clearly can still influence on another, the sense of a clear and necessary historical sequence that will lead to world revolution has begun to fragment.

Drawing together these various moments of Padmore's analysis in *How Britain Rules Africa*, it becomes increasingly clear that operations of fascism in the colonial context are internally contradictory: Colonial Fascism, we might suggest, has the double historical function of accumulating Black labor power on an ever-expanding scale and, on the other hand, obstructing the development of a Black labor movement. This duality throws into crisis the various developmental narratives, including the narrative of proletarian class struggle, that had structured the horizon of political expectation for Black Labor Internationalists in the early 1930s. It is broadly understood that one of the long-term impacts of fascism on European Marxism was a deep disenchantment with linear, evolutionary paradigms of progress.[182] Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* sought to differentiate historical materialism from such unilinear conceptions of progress, countering these with the famous image of Klee's

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[182] Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. (London ; New York: Verso, 2016.)

"Angelus Novus" fleeing history's growing wreckage pile.[183] The role of the concept of Colonial Fascism in Padmore's trajectory is broadly homologous to these trends in continental Marxism. *How Britain Rules Africa* casts doubt on the kind of syllogistic reasoning underpinning Lenin's original theorization of the proletarian vanguard, in which political agency is conceived as a function of the stage of economic development. Throughout the text Padmore observes industrial development engendering consequences contrary to the expected outcome: While the South Africa Union is the "most highly developed territory in Africa," it also "affords us a striking example of a country where the indigenous population is by far more homogenous socially than in any other colonial or semi-colonial countries."[184] Nigeria, which is "by far more industrialized than, say, Sierra Leone, is more backwards from the point of organized labor."[185] Under Colonial Fascism, industrial "development" and mass proletarianization are themselves inextricable from a "socially backward system, retarding the economic development of Africa, and the cultural progress of the Africans."[186]

Padmore's philosophy of history is ultimately more Benjaminian than Leninist. Rather than transcending the "trappings" of outmoded structures of political domination, the process of imperial accumulation in Africa appears to recapitulate the history of enslavement: "In the face of all the facts which we have described in the foregoing pages, people who say that the slave status of the African has been abolished, either do not know the real conditions under which the

[183] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 258.

[184] Ibid., 334.

[185] Ibid., 348.

[186] Ibid., 378.

great mass of black people live, or else they are hypocrites."[187] True, Padmore admits, "Europeans no longer capture Blacks and ship them to America and the West Indies, as the institution of chattel slavery no longer suits the economic needs of the capitalist class." What has replaced chattel slavery, however, is simply a new form of enslavement: "The modern exploiters have found that wage-slaves are cheaper; for since a proletarian is not the private property of his master, the employer is under no obligation to feed him when unemployed."[188] Given the various contemporary forms of political domination and labor-coercion Padmore has surveyed throughout the text, his invocation of the wage-slave in this closing passage is striking and, given the figure's vexed legacy in Marxist discourse, even a bit dissonant[189]: How are we meant to read Padmore's adoption of this figure? As Robbie Shilliam has argued in a critical reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marxists have often deployed the "slave analogy" in order to make the misery of the European proletariat intelligible while at the same time obscuring the histories and struggles of actually enslaved peoples.[190] In Padmore's hands, however, this analogy acquires a new significance: Indeed, it is unclear to what extent Padmore intends the "slave" in "wage-slave" to be taken as an analogy at all. The rhetorical power of the comparison to chattel slavery in this case derives, in other words, precisely from the "real conditions under which the great mass of black people live." Padmore's deployment of the wage-slave in *How Britain Rules*

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[187] Ibid., 386.

[188] Ibid.

[189] The term has also played a key role in certain strains of white supremacist thought. The "wage-slave" was deployed by U.S. Southern slave apologists to paint Northern industrial capitalism as more degrading and exploitative than slavery. See Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830-1860 ;* (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

[190] Robbie Shilliam, "Decolonizing the Manifesto: Communism and the Slave Analogy" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Communist Manifesto*, ed. Terrell Carver and James Farr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 195-214.

*Africa* is continuous with his career-long effort to imagine possibilities for Black resistance beyond the platonic ideal of "fully developed exploitation." It is precisely the contemporaneity of the "distorted," "impure" and "moribund" forms of exploitation in Africa and throughout the Black Atlantic which impel Padmore, in Benjamin's terms, to "grasp the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."[191]

[191] Waltern Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 263.

This perception of classes forming within African society and his attachment to the Marxist world-view placed James in a position shared by several Black intellectuals over the course of this century. It required a reconciliation between the African and the World Revolution, as it were, and a plotting of the coordinates of race and class. The manner in which these were resolved by James is instructive.

--Walter Rodney, "The African Revolution."

It will not help to say that I am wrong in the parallels which I have set out to interpret; for I shall reply that my mistake, lived and deeply felt by millions of men like me—proves the positive value of error. It is a value which you must learn.

--George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*

## Chapter 4: Analogy as History: C.L.R. James, The Slave-Proletarian Analogy, and the Combined Revolution

Throughout this dissertation we have seen Black Caribbean writers develop original lexicons to describe messy and conflicted processes of class formation throughout the interwar colonial world—processes for which no fully developed theoretical vocabulary yet existed. Padmore's efforts to represent the global Black worker increasingly drove him, as we have seen, to grasp for analogies from the past. The "slave analogy" was not his initial point of orientation but rather a figure at which he arrived through a continuous struggle to name the various forms of contemporary "semi-slavery" and coercion deployed by elites and administrators to secure Black labor power throughout the diaspora. Despite Padmore's apparent preference for rigorous empirical documentation, his writing thus becomes increasingly "figurative"; despite his immediatism as a political organizer his lexicon begins to multiply layers of historical significance. The descriptive bleeds into the analogic and the present devolves into the past. These discursive developments represent, on one hand, quite dramatic deviations from the

horizon of revolutionary expectation which had oriented the ITCUNW at the dawn of the 1930s. Yet they do not reflect an exhaustion of faith in the possibility of Black emancipation: On the contrary, these digressions from the developmental logic of the COMINTERN Marxist script coincide with an almost millenarian faith in the immanence of anticolonial revolution. Padmore in *How Britain Rules Africa* invokes Psalm 68:31, thus signaling a new merger between Marxism and what Michael O. West calls the "revivalist tradition" of Pan-Africanism:[1] "Abyssinia, the last of free Africa, has exposed the white man's hypocrisy and destroyed the last moral influence which Europe exerted over Africa. 'Princes shall come forth from Egypt, and Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand unto God,' is what the scriptures have taught the Africans."[2] After its grim appraisal of the African labor movement *How Britain Rules Africa* ends on a note of revolutionary optimism: "As far as Africa is concerned the way is still dark, the goal is not yet in sight, but about one thing Africans have no doubts, and that is: The future belongs to the oppressed."[3]

How are we to make sense of this double temporal move into the past and the future? Under what conditions, in other words, does revolutionary discourse become entangled with historical discourse? If the previous chapter traced Padmore's confrontation with the untimely persistence of "vestigial" and "backwards" economic forms, this chapter explores the displacement of this problematic into a new project of Black radical historiography which seeks to discover revolutionary possibility in the Black Atlantic past. Padmore's scramble for an historical analogy that can make intelligible the specifically contemporary modes of "feudal"

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[1] Michael O. West, "Garveyism Root and Branch: From the Age of Revolution to the Onset of Black Power," in *Global Garveyism*, ed. Robert J. Stephens and Adam Ewing (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 16.

[2] George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (Negro Universities Press: New York, 1936), 17.

[3] Ibid., 396.

coercion proliferating across the Atlantic world finds a kind of dialectical mirror-image in an emergent historical discourse which recasts New World slave resistance in the mold of contemporary struggles. This new historiographical intervention itself offers a certain kind of answer to Padmore's question near the end of *How Britain Rules Africa*: "On the one hand, the black workers are being ruthlessly exploited by capital, and on the other hand, organized labour slam in their faces the door of economic development. What then is to be done?"[4] The tragic double-bind of ruthless exploitation and economic underdevelopment led Padmore to figure contemporary Black workers as reincarnated slaves; the new history, conversely, represents real slaves as embryonic proletarians.

The slaves of the French colony of San Domingo, writes C.L.R. James in a key passage of *The Black Jacobins*, "were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement."[5] Published in 1938, two years after *How Britain Rules Africa*, *The Black Jacobins* treats the Haitian Revolution as a model for the African anticolonial revolution that he and Padmore had been plotting since the founding of the International African Friends of Abyssinia. If Padmore ends his analysis of the African labor movement with a temporal leap backwards into the slave past, C.L.R. James consciously turns to that past in search of the revolutionary African future. "Now, what did I have in mind when I wrote this book?," James asked his audience in the 1971 lectures at the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta. "I had in mind writing about the San Domingo Revolution as the preparation for the revolution that George Padmore and all of us

[4] Ibid., 325.

[5] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

were interested in, that is, the revolution in Africa."[6] While it has itself been consecrated as a "classic" history of New World slavery and resistance, then, *The Black Jacobins* was first conceived (and received) within the same contradictory conjuncture of struggle and crisis as *How Britain Rules Africa*.[7] As David Scott has argued, *The Black Jacobins* "gives to [the Haitian Revolution] the shape of an allegory of emancipationist redemption that embodies in a compelling way the great longing for black and anticolonial revolution."[8] James' analogy of the slaves of San Domingo to a "modern proletariat" plays an important—and, as I will show, a profoundly vexed—role in this emancipationist allegory.

This slave-proletarian analogy is a crucial figurative moment in *The Black Jacobins*. Indeed, the analogy is charged with multiple kinds of significance: It is at once an historical claim about a politico-economic formation, a dramatic crux in James' narrative of the slaves' revolutionary struggle, and a moment of "allegoresis" that seems to transpose the literal narrative of the text into a new ("modern") order of signification. This chapter is interested in all three "levels" of meaning—the historical, the diegetic, and the allegorical—and, indeed, takes it for granted that no single level can be adequately grasped in isolation from the others. To unpack the significance of the analogy as an historical claim thus requires understanding its role within the larger "plot"; to disclose the meaning of the latter in turn requires toggling between James'

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[6] C.L.R. James, "Lectures on the Black Jacobins," *Small Axe* 8 (September 2000): 72.

[7] For a critical discussion of the re-christening of *The Black Jacobins* as a classic see Christopher Taylor, "The Black Jacobins: From Great Book to Classic?" in *Age of* Revolutions, May 2, 2016, https://ageofrevolutions.com/2016/05/02/the-black-jacobins-from-great-book-to-classic/

[8] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 30.

account of the revolutionary Caribbean past and his “preparation” for a revolutionary African future.[9]

The slave-proletarian analogy has itself become something of a symbol, an easily citable textual distillation of *The Black Jacobins*’ argument: To debate the significance and the validity of this analogy is, it would seem, to debate the efficacy of the Jamesian approach to history itself. In scholarship on *The Black Jacobins*, the analogy has served as an entry point for critical reflections on the question of the slaves’ agency, James’s relation to Marxism, and the problem of historical temporality. For Selma James and Anthony Bogues, the analogy marks a rupture from orthodox Marxist categories, provoking the “question of how to define who is working class” and “opening the door for a different set of interpretations of the social formation of Caribbean society.”[10] Bill Schwarz sees this moment as a challenge to evolutionary Marxist determinism: “[The slaves] were behaving not as the laws of history decreed they should, but as if they were occupying another place and another time, neither of which properly belonged to them.”[11] Others have complained that the comparison obscures more than it clarifies. Indeed Bogues, while commending James’ recasting of the slave as a modern subject, also suggests that he ultimately fails “to rework the premodern/modern divide in ways which would have been more reflective of African realities.”[12] Madison Smart Bell quibbles that James sacrificed conceptual rigor for symbolism. James is least convincing, for Bell, when he tries to “hammer

[9] I draw here on and throughout the chapter Frederic Jameson’s account of the relationship between distinct levels of meaning in allegorical discourse, particularly his notion of the “stereoscopic simultaneity of the relationship of the literal and allegorical levels.” See Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 35.

[10] Selma James, “The Black Jacobins: Past and Present,” in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, ed. Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 76. Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*.

[11] Bill Schwarz, “Haiti and Historical Time,” in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, 105.

[12] Bogues, *Black Heretics*, 80.

the Haitian Revolution into the Marxist mold… It makes sense for James to refer to the black slaves of the colony, who so vastly outnumbered the other half-dozen identifiable groups, as 'the masses,' but to regard them as a proper Marxist proletariat risks considerable distortion."[13] Nick Nesbitt also suggests that "The specificity of this claim is less than convincing, at least if one takes 'proletarian' to mean something more than simply the oppressed and exploited of the world."[14]

On one hand, then, the analogy has been celebrated as a challenge to rigid Marxist categorizations and classificatory orders; on the other, it has been castigated as a distortion of both political-economic and "African" realities. What seems to be missing on both sides of the debate, though, is any sustained critical reflection on the mechanics of *analogy* itself as a semantic and logical operation. This lacuna is peculiar, given the remarkable preponderance of analogies and analogical claims in *The Black Jacobins*: Indeed, the construction of analogy—conceived broadly as a process of comparison asserting similitude or correspondence between two or more distinct terms—is fundamental not only to the form but also to the content of James' text. The title itself epitomizes James' effort to recast both Haitian and French Revolutions in a global analogic imaginary in which geographically dispersed events echo, imitate and extend one another. At the very core of the text is the historical process wherein the French masses and the slaves of San Domingo come to view their respective struggles as "similar" and "comparable"; this perception of resemblance sets in motion a global movement of discursive and ideological transposition that reflects and propels the escalation of revolutionary struggle in both spheres:

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[13] Madison Smartt Bell, "Afterword to *The Black Jacobins's* Italian Edition," in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, 315.

[14] Nick Nesbitt, "Fragments of a Universal History: Global Capital, Mass Revolution, and the Idea of Equality in *The Black Jacobins*, in *The Black Jacobins Reader*, 142
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"The blacks were taking their part in the destruction of European Feudalism begun by the French Revolution, and liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution, meant far more to them than to any Frenchman."[15] At the same time, James continuously relates the global revolutionary moment of the late eighteenth century to a complex matrix of contemporary and future analogues. The slaves' ritual Voodoo song sustains emancipatory hopes just as "the Bantu to-day sing in secret the national anthem of Africa."[16] The African leader of the future, James declares at the end of the text, will read "a stray pamphlet of Lenin or Trotsky as Toussaint read the Abbé Raynal."[17] The whole architecture of the emancipationist allegory can in this sense be understood as a four-part analogy: The Haitian Revolution was to the French Revolution what the African Revolution will be to the World Revolution.

I will return soon to the slave-proletarian analogy and its peculiar position within the narrative architecture of the *The Black Jacobins*. First, it may be useful to ask a broader question: Why analogy? What kind of historical knowledge is disclosed through analogy, and why does this history in particular seem to depend for the conveyance of meaning on such a rich and complex analogical apparatus? James, it seems to me, is a deeply analogical thinker: The effort to "apprehend, perceive, contemplate and see similarity" constitutes one of his primary political and intellectual commitments.[18] Yet James's analogies, far from neutral perceptions of similitude, aim quite pointedly and deliberately to challenge commonsense racial, colonial, liberal-capitalist taxonomies and ideological schemas. The plantation and the factory; the

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[15] James, *The Black Jacobins,* 198.

[16] Ibid., 18.

[17] Ibid., 377.

[18] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Routledge Classics, 1977), 30.

proletarian and the slave; the British labor movement and the anticolonial struggle; the Haitian Revolution and Ethiopian resistance to the Italian invasion:[19] By bringing into analogic relation these discrepant social forms and processes, James renders their meanings porous, opening history to the "uncertainties of conjunction."[20] Much like the "heretical" poetics that Jacques Rancière sees in the work of E.P. Thompson and Jules Michelet, James' analogies transgress the borders of ordinary conceptual divisions, allowing the "articulation of an experience otherwise kept in silence by the separation of languages."[21]

That James sought throughout his career to think "beyond the boundaries" of extant ideological systems has, of course, long been a hallmark theme of James scholarship. Indeed, it can be argued that James's analogic impulse helps explain his appeal to divergent political and intellectual traditions. It is in the realm of analogy, for example, that James's Marxist internationalism interfuses with the "deconstructive thrusts" that Sylvia Wynter traces in her account of the "Jamesian poesis."[22] The poststructuralist James and the Marxist James are both analogists, precisely because analogy has both "constructive" and "deconstructive" valences. "An essential aspect of James's method," writes Paul Le Blanc, "is to make links between seemingly diverse realities, sometimes to take something that is commonly perceived as being marginal and to insist that it is central. This is done in a manner that profoundly alters (rather

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[19] As noted in the previous chapter, these comparisons were central to James's rhetoric in *International African Opinion*. See James, "Editorial," *IAO* 1.1 (July 1938): 2 and James, "Sir Stafford Crips and Trusteeship, *International African Opinion* 1.3 (September 1938): 3.

[20] Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 94.

[21] Ibid., 93.

[22] Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poesis," in *C.L.R. James's Caribbean*, ed. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 63-92.

than displaces) the traditionally 'central' categories."[23] Despite Christian Høgsbjerg's citing of this quote to pit the Marxist against the poststructuralist James, it is better read as explaining their fundamental indistinguishability.[24] The affinities that James establishes, after all, attempt to provide an aperture onto the "totality" of global capitalism precisely by calling into question (we might say, by "deconstructing") what Wynter calls the "master conceptions" that govern perceptions of social reality.[25] The Jamesian analogy reveals resemblances which in turn provoke questions about "how to define" concepts and categories: They in this way offer a kind of political-semiotic gathering place where distinct histories, subject positions, and struggles engage in collective transferences of meaning.

Analogies can be risky propositions. The assertion of similitude, correspondence, or equivalence between distinct terms often raises the uncomfortable possibility of a category mistake or, worse, epistemological violence. Indeed, the very premise that New World slavery can be rendered intelligible via analogy is anathema to an influential strain of contemporary Black studies, Afropessimism, which warns against the "ruse of analogy" when considering the specific material and metaphysical violence of anti-Blackness.[26] Analogy, even when mobilized for ostensibly radical or revolutionary ends, can reproduce larger asymmetries of power and epistemic authority. As Adom Getachew and Michel-Rolph Trouillot demonstrate, the Haitian Revolution has often been reduced to a symbolic proxy for someone else's struggle. The

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[23] Paul Le Blanc, Introduction to *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C.L.R. James 1939-1949*, ed. Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc  (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1994), 1.

[24] Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, 15.

[25] Wynter, "The Jamesian Poesis," 63.

[26] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

historiography of Haiti has, as Trouillot notes, been clouded by "the assumption that the French connection is both sufficient and necessary to the Haitian Revolution."[27] Even efforts to center the Haitian Revolution in genealogies of universal human rights discourses, argues Getachew, have often depended on a "framework of realization" which "entails the diminution of revolutionary action to the realm of extension and application."[28] We might indeed ask whether James' slave-proletarian analogy similarly obscures the specificity of the Haitian Revolution as a revolution against colonial slavery. After all, James' analogy was itself the product of its own distinctive revolutionary context: It was devised, as Scott puts it, in a "problem-space" whose questions, problems, and aspirations were far removed from those of the Haitian revolutionaries.[29] James himself alluded to the constraints of analogical thinking when he said that "Writers on the West Indies always relate them to their approximation to Britain, France, Spain, and America, that is to say, to Western civilization, but never in relation to their own history."[30] Indeed, some of the criticisms mentioned above would seem to imply that James' account of the slaves as "close to" a proletariat falls into precisely such a trap.

Yet is to analogize necessarily to erase difference? Does James's responsiveness to the specific conundrums and urgencies of 1938 necessarily distort his account of 1789? James himself clearly thought otherwise. "The violent conflicts of our age," he writes in the preface, "enable our practiced vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than

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[27] Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 104.

[28] Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-Colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," in *Political Theory* 44.6 (2016): 826

[29] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.

[30] James, "Lectures," 83.

heretofore."[31] James in other words believed that his own era of conflict could serve as a prism which would clarify rather than distort his perception of the past: The status of *The Black Jacobins* as allegory, he would argue, does not diminish its claim to historical truth. This, however, is not simply an assertion of identity or continuity between past and present. To say that the present enables a better perception of the past is not to assimilate the latter to the former; similarly, to analogize the slave to the proletarian is not to posit a simple identity between them. Paul Ricoeur has argued in an extended analysis of metaphorical discourse that "resemblance itself must be understood as a tension between identity and difference in the predicative operation set in motion by semantic innovation."[32] The distance between discrete categories is not overcome by the perception of similarity, on this account, but rather is immanent to the production of analogical meaning. Analogy in this sense may serve as a heuristic that raises the question of "tension, contradiction, and controversion" even while seeking "reconciliation" between different concepts.[33] Following Ricoeuer, I will suggest that a "tension between identity and difference" structures the relation between the various figures of James's analogy.

In what follows I first situate James's analogy at the nexus of multiple Black Atlantic political discourses that contested the meaning and significance of the Haitian Revolution from the revolution itself through the interwar period. I then explore how James used analogy to "make the Haitian Revolution thinkable" in a moment when revolution in the colonial periphery was considered both necessary and difficult to imagine. That James viewed Haiti as a model for contemporary African revolution is well known. Yet it has proven difficult to specify the

[31] James, *The Black Jacobins*, xi.

[32] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 4.

[33] Ibid., 230.

concrete lessons James drew from Haiti about the social process of revolutionary struggle in the periphery. While I can't hope to resolve the question here, I aim to show that James' analogies facilitate a more vexed and polyvalent meditation on processes of colonial class formation than has previously been assumed. James' recoding of the Haitian Revolution through a Marxist vocabulary of class struggle was clearly connected to his larger effort to, as Rodney puts it, "reconcile" the African and World Revolutions.[34] It may be tempting in this light to read *The Black Jacobins* as a kind of teleological resolution of the contradictions that Walrond, McKay and Padmore each in their own ways contended with. Yet the synthesis James achieved was a complex one. Rather than a simple claim of identity between the slave and the proletarian, it is the "collisive interplay" between these—and as we will see, other —categories of labor that facilitates the text's dual interventions into the histories Black revolt and class struggle.[35]

*The Labor of Analogy*

Analogy, it should be clear, is not inherently transgressive or liberatory: On the contrary, the systems of power that James sought to contravene were themselves buttressed by what Wynter calls an "analogical epistemology."[36] Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Wynter traces the emergence of a bourgeois "abduction system" that employs the Lockean "state of nature metaphor" in order to legitimize colonial hierarchies and property

[34] Walter Rodney, "The African Revolution" in Urgent Tasks 12 (Summer 1981), http://www.sojournertruth.net/rodney.html

[35] Fred Moten, "Not In Between: Lyric Painting, Visual History and the Postcolonial Future," *The Drama Review* 47.1 (Spring 2003), 131.

[36] Sylvia Wynter, "The Counterdoctrine," 67.

relations.[37] In *Mind and Nature* Bateson defines abduction as the “lateral extension of abstract components of description.”[38] It is abduction, for example, which allows us to “look at the anatomy of a frog and then look around to find other instances of the same abstract relations recurring in other creatures.” Bateson’s notion of abduction in this sense highlights the centrality of a kind of reflexive analogical impulse to human thought at all scales, from individual cognition to more elaborate epistemological systems: “Metaphor, dream, parable, allegory, the whole of art, the whole of science, the whole of religion…all these are instances or aggregates of instances of abduction, within the human mental sphere.” Bateson’s concept of abduction implies that analogy itself is unavoidable and intrinsic to processes of human meaning-making. Wynter argues, however, that a system of abduction can also elaborate “cultural conceptions of power” which help to consolidate colonial-capitalist power relations.[39]

Wynter argues the expansion of global capitalism required the installation of a new abduction system which replaced the aristocracy’s “symbolics of blood” with the “metaphorics of natural reason and lack of natural reason.” The bourgeoisie legitimized its hegemonic position in the global colonial order by implementing a set of “abductive extensions” premised on an “analogy with a representation of nature.” The possession of property, accumulated in reality through conquest and plunder, became a sign of “natural reason”; meanwhile, those who lacked property “revealed the degrees of lack of reason that nature had endowed them with.” The reason/unreason division is reiterated at multiple scales from the individual to the national and

[37] Ibid., 66.

[38] Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), 142.

[39] Wynter, “The Counterdoctrine,” 66.

finally the global, providing the "governing cultural categories" of the colonial social order.[40] At the global level it is non-Western peoples who represent the "lack of reason." In the "great chain of being," writes Wynter, "the Negro" becomes a "zero-term-of-reason," equated by means of analogy with "brute nature." To challenge the colonial social order, then, requires a confrontation with this analogical epistemology. An anticolonial revolution will necessarily "shift our whole system of abductions. [To do this] we must pass through the threat of that chaos where thought becomes possible." Wynter sees the Jamesian "poesis" as an effort to combat the master categories of this colonial abduction system: "His poesis has been a constant and sustained attempt to shift the 'systems of abduction' first of colonial Liberalism, later of Stalinist and Trotskyist Marxism, and overall, of the bourgeois cultural model and its underlying head/body, reason/instinct metaphorics."[41]

As Wynter demonstrates, then, analogical constructions are far from neutral acts of cognition. Rather, the analogies one draws to make a given social phenomena or concept intelligible may serve to either reinforce or disrupt established classificatory systems. Insofar as our "abductive extensions" mark an encounter between that which is novel or unprecedented and that which is already known, such abductions can be said to demarcate the horizon of the thinkable within a given social order. Analogies may in this sense serve as particularly revealing expressions of "symbolic power," defined by Pierre Bourdieu as "the power to constitute the given by enunciating it."[42] Through analogy, social actors test the limits and applicability of available categories and, by extension, gauge their own ability to "impose the legitimate

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[40] Ibid. 66

[41] Ibid. 67

[42] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1982), 170.

definition of the divisions of the social world."[43] The construction of analogy is not always immediately discernible as such: We might indeed posit that symbolic power functions in part by successfully sublating analogical claims into commonsense social categories.[44] Such would seem to be one way of describing the invention of the category of "the Negro," which transmutes a perception of "family resemblance" based on phenotype into a single racial classification, thereby effacing differences of culture, religion, language, etc.[45] The point is that the selection and determination of socially salient similarities is itself an exercise of power—in this case, of colonial-capitalist power. Yet there are times in history when such analogical apparatuses break down—when the social definitions constructed by power are revealed as contingent articulations, and when new analogies are put forward to extend new political possibilities. Analogy in this sense plays a role both in the making and unmaking of social collectivities.[46]

Haiti had been subjected to the burdens and distortions of analogy long before James undertook his research into the "only successful slave revolt in history."[47] Indeed, *The Black Jacobins* participates in a long and contested history of analogization whose participants include both defenders and opponents of Haitian sovereignty. This process of analogization arises from two linked but conflicting factors: namely, the desire of sympathetic observers and interpreters

[43] Ibid., 22.

[45] As Ricoeur observes, "A family resemblance first brings individuals together before the rule of a logical class dominates them." See *The Rule of Metaphor*, 233. Such is also the case for class categories. We would do well in this vein to recall that Marx's adoption of the Roman concept of the "proletarian" for nineteenth-century wage laborers was itself, initially, an analogical move. For an account of the construction of the category of the Negro during and beyond the Atlantic slave trade see Cedric Robinson, "The Inventions of the Negro," *Social Identities* 7.3 (2001): 329-361.

[46] What Bourdieu calls "classification struggles" are struggles to "make and unmake groups." See *Language and Symbolic Power*, 221.

[47] C.L.R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 2012), 38.

for a “replication” of the revolution in other contexts and, on the other hand, the desire of colonial powers to prevent precisely such a replication. Trouillot famously argues that “The Haitian Revolution entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”[48] An organized, slave-led revolution against the colonial plantation system was incomprehensible within the racial ontology that permeated even the radical strands of French Enlightenment thought. Thus, the events that transpired in San Domingo between 1791 and 1804 “constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France or in England had a conceptual frame of reference.”[49] Trouillot traces the discursive strategies whereby contemporary French, British and American observers “silenced” the revolution, reconciling the fact of organized Black revolt with the narratives that made sense within the framework of their racial ontology. By deploying various rhetorical strategies of erasure, the West made the Haitian Revolution appear as the product of external influence or an “unfortunate repercussion of planters’ miscalculations”—anything but the expression of the slaves’ rational and natural desire for freedom. Through these strategies of what Wynter would call abduction, the fact of Black revolution is molded into the governing categories of the colonial social order. Notably, silencing for Trouillot is not equivalent to mere erasure or forgetting. Indeed, the silencing of the Haitian Revolution was “ironically reinforced by the significance of the revolution for its contemporaries and for the generation immediately following.” In the nineteenth century, the revolution was treated by both sympathetic and antagonistic observers as a “litmus test for the Black race.”

[48] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 73.

[49] Ibid., 82.

Trouillot in this sense worries that the allegorizing of Haiti can itself function as a mode of silencing: "Haiti mattered to all of them, but only as a pretext to talk about something else."[50]

The racist ontology that rendered Haitian independence unthinkable was resuscitated in the era of New Imperialism. As European powers partitioned Africa, claims of racial hierarchy were marshalled to assert the "impossibility of Black sovereignty."[51] In this period of imperial expansion, the fact of actually existing Black sovereign states acquired outsized symbolic importance for both proponents and critics of colonialism. After independence, international ostracization had itself facilitated Haiti's "unequal integration" into the capitalist world system.[52] Now colonial apologists cynically recast structural impediments to postcolonial development as proof of Black incapacity for self-government. In the infamously racist *The English in the West Indies, or the Bow of Ulysses*, James Anthony Froude conjured lurid fantasies of Haitian barbarism as a cautionary tale against West Indian independence. Denigrating Haiti as a land "where they eat babies, and no white man can own a yard of land," Froude treated the Black Republic as proof of the dangers of decolonization:[53] "If, for the sake of theory or to shirk responsibility, we force [Black West Indians] to govern themselves, the state of Hayti stands as a ghastly example of the condition into which they will then inevitably fall."[54]

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[50] Ibid., 90-97.

[51] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 52.

[52] See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* and Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 18. For a more thorough account of Haiti's post-independence trajectory see Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

[53] James Anthony Froude, The English in the West Indies; or, the Bow of Ulysses (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), 56,

[54] Ibid., 81.

By treating Haiti as an object-lesson in the pitfalls of Black sovereignty, Froude revealed how analogic abduction could be marshalled to support a program of white racial empire. Froude did not only denigrate Haiti; he also reinforced a racist analogical syllogism in which the Haitian experience served as a "litmus test" for the "black race." It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Black writers who contested Froude's claims in an attempt to vindicate Black capacity for self-government also felt compelled to address the "Haiti analogy." In his influential rebuttal to Froude, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables*, the Black Trinidadian schoolmaster John Jacob Thomas took issue both with Froude's account of post-independence Haitian history and with the logic of the comparison.[55]Froude's "fables" contradicted the received explanations for the Black state's struggles: Namely, that the founders of the Black Republic had been "most unfortunate in the circumstances under which they so gloriously conquered their merited freedom" and, despite gaining independence, were "impotent to use the intellectual resources of which their valour had made them possessors."[56] Did not the antagonism between Mulattoes and "their darker-hued kinsmen" account for the "continued failure of Hayti to realize the dreams of Toussaint?"[57] More to the point, transformed historical conditions militated against a repeat of the retaliatory measures that Froude weaponized as a "negro-phobic political hobgoblin."[58] Even if one took at face value Froude's potted history, changes in West Indian demography and class composition since emancipation nullified the "danger-to-the-whites" lesson he took from Haiti. Treating Haiti as a barometer for the future of the West Indies in the absence of colonial administration "simply

[55] J.J. Thomas, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude* (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Company, 1889)

[56] Ibid., 10.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 16.

because of our oneness with its inhabitants in origin and complexion" is thus "perversity gone wild in the manufacture of analogies."[59]

While Thomas defended the Haitian Revolution against Froude's distortions, then, he was less invested in reclaiming a revolutionary legacy than in resisting the analogy implicit in Froude's treatment of Haiti as a "ghastly example." Thomas did not accept Froude's racist vision of Haitian history, but neither did he see the Haitian experience as evidence to buttress his own argument for self-determination; he preferred Liberia as a more useful analogue, but more generally sought examples of uplift and self-sufficiency from the British West Indies themselves in order to advance his argument for Black self-determination.[60] Yet the memory of the Haitian Revolution followed other, more unpredictable routes in the Black Atlantic world. Julius Scott has excavated the transatlantic intelligence networks that circulated a "common wind" of revolutionary ideas across the Americas in the age of the Haitian Revolution.[61] Drawing in part on Scott's research, Michael O. West and William G. Martin identify the Haitian Revolution as a turning point in the history of Black Internationalism. Haiti, they write, "became a bellwether of black freedom in the Atlantic world…Haiti's symbolic value to black internationalism was a primary reason for the hostility and isolation it faced from slaveholders and white powers everywhere."[62] On this account it was precisely the potential for replication that had motivated efforts to silence the revolution. Denmark Vesey told his followers in the 1822 conspiracy of

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[59] Ibid., 14.

[60] Ibid., 16.

[61] Julius Sherrard Scott and Marcus Rediker, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London ; New York: Verso, 2018).

[62] Michael O. West and William G. Martin, "Haiti I'm Sorry: The Haitian Revolution and the Forging of the Black International," in *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International Since the Age of Revolution*, ed. Michael O. West, William G. Martin and Fanon Che Wilkins (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 73.

Charleston, South Carolina that help would arrive from Haiti to support the capture of the city; José Antonio Aponte drew portraits of Toussaint L'Ouverture in an effort to inspire a mass insurrection against the plantation system in Cuba.[63] Free Black abolitionists also drew on the symbol and example of Haiti. As West shows, Prince Hall, the founder of African American freemasonry, justified the uprising in Saint-Domingue using biblical scripture while the abolitionists David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet invoked Haiti in speeches exhorting African Americans to revolt.[64] These and countless other examples reveal how Haiti sparked a revolutionary "contagion" indifferent to national boundaries, inflecting Black emancipatory hopes across the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

If the age of New Imperialism prompted a renewal of a racist discourse that treated Haiti as proof of Black unfitness for sovereignty, it also created the conditions for a revival of the dream of replication. The 1915 U.S. occupation of Haiti was a turning point both for the nation itself and for Black diasporic political and cultural movements. As West observes, the U.S.'s attack on Haiti amidst the rising anticolonial ferment of the Great War impelled a new generation of Black radical intellectuals and activists to recall Haiti's revolutionary legacy: "Revolutionary heroes, meaning the best-known male military figures of the Haitian Revolution, were metaphorically recalled to active duty...[Toussaint Louverture] would subsequently be pressed into service, this time as an archetype of the reemergent black international—in short, as an exemplar of the New Negro."[65] Pan-Africanists from the British West Indies were at the forefront of the new reclamation of Haiti as revolutionary archetype. Marcus Garvey described

[63] Ibid., 84.

[64] West, "Garveyism Root and Branch," 17.

[65] Ibid., 24.

Louverture as “the greatest Negro to ever come out of the West” and fashioned himself as a “new Toussaint.”[66] Among the poems of Pan-African exhortation published by Cyril Briggs’ *The Crusader* was Ben E. Burrell’s “Haiti, Awake!”, which called upon the besieged state to channel its revolutionary tradition into resistance against the new imperial foe. “Why is thy forehead in the dust?,” Burrell pleaded, “Hast thou not heard of the distinct call/ Of brethren of the darker race,/to stand and guard the Carib wall/And look the foeman in the face?...Haiti, awake! The mighty test/ Of Time has marked your ancient name,/ Great Champion of the Indies West, Arise! The world shall guard your fame.”[67] If Burrell exhorted Haiti to make good on a revolutionary legacy by standing as guardian of the “Carib wall,” Hubert Harrison made the complementary point that a defense of Haitian sovereignty must be central to diasporic anticolonial movements: “What boots it that we strike heroic attitudes and talk grandiloquently of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands when we Africans of the dispersion can let the land of Louverture lie like a fallen flower beneath the feet of swine?”[68] It was in this this postwar context of agitation across multiple anticolonial fronts, then, that Haitian resistance—past and present—was drawn into analogical proximity with an immanent African revolution.

C.L.R. James’s writing on the Haitian Revolution began in a mode closer to Thomas’ than Harrison’s or Burrell’s. Writing in 1931 for the Trinidad-based journal *The Beacon*, a key organ for a growing community of anticolonial intellectuals on the island, James took issue with the treatment of Toussaint Louverture in an essay called “Race Admixture” by the English scientist Dr. Sidney Harland. Harland’s essay had, as a James put it, “stated that the negro race

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ben E. Burrell, “Haiti, Awake!” in *The Crusader* II.9 (May 1920), 11.

[68] Hubert Harrison, *When Africa Awakes* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997), 106.

was inferior in intelligence to the white."[69] Harland ranked Louverture as a member of "Class F," the "lowest of the superior classes," in a classificatory scheme inspired by the eugenicist Francis Galton. This James found unforgivable: Summarizing in one long paragraph Toussaint's remarkable rise from coachman to revolutionary leader and his various military, economic and diplomatic achievements throughout the war, James concluded that Harland's ranking was "arrant nonsense."[70] James' 1931 defense of Toussaint, as Robert Hill and David Scott have argued, mark the beginning of a "vindicatory" strain that inflects James' writing on the Haitian Revolution through *The Black Jacobins.*[71] Nonetheless, the terms of James' vindication were to shift quite dramatically. After arriving in England in 1932, James' plan to write a biography of Toussaint "for no other than a literary reason" began to evolve into something more ambitious.[72] By 1938, James had converted to Trotskyism, founded the International African Service Bureau, written a play on Toussaint Louverture, and published three books including *The Black Jacobins.* By the eve of the second World War, his estimation of the Haitian Revolution's significance had metastasized. As James' continuous invocation of the Haiti analogy in the pages of *International African Opinion* demonstrated, he had transformed from a vindicationist in the mold of Thomas to a prophet of replication: "If we must fight, then Africans and peoples of African descent will fight for themselves, confident that in taking this course we, like the Blacks of San Domingo,

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[69] C.L.R. James, "The Intelligence of the Negro," in *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, ed. Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 189.

[70] Ibid., 196.

[71] See Scott, *Conscripts*, 79 and Robert A. Hill, "C.L.R. James: The Myth of Western Civilization," in *Enterprise of the Indies* , ed. George Lamming (Port of Spain: Trinidad and Tobago Institute of the West Indies, 1999), 255-259.

[72] James, "Lectures," 67.

will be playing an historic role in liberation not only ourselves but other sections of oppressed humanity….Peace and Empire are irreconcilable. Imperialism must be destroyed."[73]

To reconstruct James' political and intellectual evolution from his arrival in England to the publication of *The Black Jacobins* would be a monumentally difficult task, and clearly beyond the scope of this chapter. In a discussion of this period of James' life Robert Hill notes that "It would be trying to reach for the impossible if we sought after a complete description of James's evolution over this pivotal six-year stretch in England. Many separate histories are bound up together in each stage of the work, and each would separately necessitate a great deal of further research."[74] As Hill's comment suggests, the challenge inheres not simply in accounting for James's prodigious output, but in following the development of a political imagination that sought to think "many separate histories" simultaneously. In his lectures on the writing of *The Black Jacobins* James' conveys a sense of the sheer temporal range of his thinking in these years. First, James recalls, he paused his work on the Toussaint biography to read Trotsky's *The History of the Revolution*; this in turn prompts him to read more Trotsky, as well as Lenin, Marx, Stalin, and to become a Trotskyist. James was thus developing a Marxist political philosophy and method while continuing to collect material on the San Domingo revolution. "I was a highly trained Marxist," James states, "and that is the person who wrote *The Black Jacobins*."[75] At the same time, James recalls, "I am meeting a lot of black people and African people in London. George Padmore, an extraordinary man, comes and he says he is

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[73] C.L.R. James, "Editorial," International African Opinion 1.1 (July 1938):2-3.

[74] Robert Hill, "In England, 1932-1938" in *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, ed. Paul Buhle (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), 61, 63. Nonetheless several admirable efforts have been made. I draw here on Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*; Worcester, *C.L.R. James*.

[75] C.L.R. James, "Lectures," 71.

going to form the International African Service Bureau…Gradually, then, I began to gain in England a conception of black people which I didn't possess when I left the Caribbean..”[76] Like the writers discussed in previous chapters, then, James was radicalized at the interstices of two political-cultural formations: Marxism and Pan-Africanism. Even more than those that preceded him, though, James dedicated himself to the elaboration of a method and a vocabulary that would allow for a synthesis between the two. It is in the context of this effort to, as Walter Rodney aptly puts it, reconcile the “African and the World Revolution” that James begins to imagine the slaves of San Domingo not only as models for contemporary African struggles, but as agents of the class struggle.

Indeed, James in these years was seeking a double reconciliation: While preparing for a combined African-World Revolution, he at the same time sought to demonstrate the material and ideological linkages between the Haitian and French Revolutions. The two “combined revolutions” were increasingly fused in his mind: In speeches and political writings, James drew these periods into narrative continuity, establishing circuits of meaning that altered the political significance of both past and present. In a 1938 editorial for *International African Opinion* James marshalled the example of Haiti to critique the common British Socialist assumption that Africa was not yet “ready” for independence but needed to be governed by “trusteeship” under an international mandate. “We have an historic parallel,” James wrote. “The half-brutish and degraded slaves in San Domingo in 1791 joined the French Revolution. In six years illiterate slaves were Generals of division and able administrators….The African slaves will do the same and more at the prospect of a new existence.”[77] James here echoes Padmore's adoption of the

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[76] Ibid., 69.

[77] James, “Sir Stafford Crips and Trusteeship, International African Opinion 1.3 (September 1938): 3

figure of the slave in *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, but to a different purpose: Whereas Padmore's account of colonial enslavement was framed by an appeal for support from metropolitan labor, for James it is the history of slave *revolt* that is salient for anticolonial politics in the present. The San Domingo revolution proved that the politico-economic double-bind of violent exploitation and underdevelopment could be overcome—that, in other words, labor remained a revolutionary force despite or even because of the "backwards" nature of colonial economies. Despite the temporal gap between the two periods, then, James insisted that they were part of a single revolutionary process. "What we as Marxists have to see," James wrote in the 1939 essay "Revolution and the Negro," "is the tremendous role played by Negroes in the transformation of Western civilization from feudalism to capitalism. It is only from this vantage-ground that we shall be able to appreciate (and prepare for) the still greater role that they must of necessity play in the transition from capitalism to socialism."[78] The Haiti-Africa analogy thus established a larger conceptual and narrative unity between two epochal transformation of the global economic order: The overthrow of chattel slavery in the New World appears as a prelude to the overthrow of the new slavery in Africa.

Taken together, then, James' two "reconciliations" amounted to a striking revision of the history of global class struggle. Much like Padmore in his account of Colonial-Fascism, James insisted that the expansion of global imperialism had linked the fate of workers in metropole and periphery. While Padmore's empirical studies emphasized structural impediments to the crystallization of a proletarian vanguard in Africa, however, James invested great optimism in the various embryonic and partially proletarianized strata that Padmore himself had identified. A complex symbiosis emerged in which James drew on the Padmore's encyclopedic knowledge of

[78] C.L.R. James, "Revolution and the Negro," in C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism, 77.

contemporary African conditions and replotted the data within a longer history of Black resistance. This collaborative dynamic was particularly crucial for *A History of Negro Revolt*, a study commissioned by the socialist historian Raymond Postage for the monthly review *FACT*.[79] While ultimately authored by James, *A History of Negro Revolt* synthesized James's historical research with information culled from *The Negro Worker* and *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, relying especially heavily on Padmore's knowledge in the sections on Africa. Even in the contemporary sections, however, West Indian slave resistance served as a constant reference point. Recounting the story of the Congolese religious leader Simon Kimbangu, James noted that "the slaves left the plantations to listen to the prophet, in much the same way as the Negro slaves in the West Indies a century before had been wont to plead religion and religious meetings as a convenient excuse for leaving the plantations at all times and without permission."[80] Elsewhere James compared the San Domingo revolt to the union organizing drive of Clements Kadalie in South Africa: "The real parallel to this movement is the mass uprising in San Domingo. There is the same instinctive capacity for organization, the same throwing up of gifted-leaders from among the masses."[81] While James drew out different aspects of slaves' resistance when discussing different forms of mobilization in Africa, the overarching point of the analogy was clear: Precisely because the forms of resistance he alludes to in the past had contributed to the overthrow of "feudalism" and New World slavery, their reoccurrence in contemporary Africa augured the overthrow of colonial capitalism.

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[79] Høgsbjerg, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, 114.

[80] C.L.R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt*, 75.

[81] Ibid., 85.

By situating the problem of contemporary colonial class formation and resistance within a longer historical perspective, then, James' text sought to envision a path beyond what Padmore had called the "tragic situation" of Africans under imperial rule. "Though often retarded and sometimes diverted," writes James in the remarkable closing passage, "the current of history, observed from an eminence, can be seen to unite strange and diverse tributaries in its own embracing logic":

> The San Domingo revolutionaries, the black arm in the Civil War, were unconscious but potent levers in two great propulsions forward of modern civilization. Today the Rhodesian copper miner, living the life of three shillings a week, is but another cog in the wheels of a creaking world economy, as uneconomic in the twentieth century as a naked slave in the cotton-fields of Alabama a hundred years ago. But Negro emancipation has expanded with the centuries; what was local and national in San Domingo and America is today an international urgency, entangling the future of a hundred million Africans with all the hopes and fears of Western Europe. Though dimly, the political consciousness immanent in the historical process emerges in groping and neglected Africa. If Toussaint wrote in the language of '89, the grotesquerie of Watch Tower primitively approximates to the dialectic of Marx and Lenin. This it is which lifts out of the bleakness and invests with meaning a record of failure almost unrelieved. The African bruises and breaks himself against his bars in the interest of freedoms wider than his own.[82]

This passage eloquently distills the method and historical philosophy that James had cultivated since his arrival in England. Here, the import of analogy is laid bare: It is precisely by drawing parallels and comparisons across space and time that James seeks to grasp what Padmore had struggled to discern, namely, the "logic" of the overarching historical process. The perception of similitude—between the cotton fields of Alabama and the copper mines of Africa; between "Negro emancipation" in each period and the correlative revolution in Europe—is, in this passage, roughly identical to the perception of history itself. Indeed, it is not sufficient to say that James analogizes: He argues, even to the point of overstating, the *necessity* of analogy; he outlines what we might think of as an analogical philosophy of history. Thus, James insists that it

[82] Ibid., 106.

is only approximation to "the dialectic of Marx and Lenin" that invests the Watch Tower movement with "meaning"; it not what the Watch Tower movement *is* but rather what it *approximates* that makes the movement significant at all. Is this not a problematic statement? Doesn't James in this moment rob the Watch Tower movement of its own internal logic and particularity? While there is room to quarrel with James here, it is worth noting that the necessity of analogy for him is not an abstract commitment but arises instead from historical conditions. From the Atlantic slave trade through the present, James argues, capitalist expansion has broadened the sphere of revolutionary action: This means that peripheral regions of the world capitalist system may "write in the language" of a global political upheaval even while retaining their own distinctive political goals and content. Imperialism has created a world in which dispersed struggles necessarily echo and approximate one another, whether individual actors are conscious of it or not. Analogy has become politically necessary because capitalism itself is a great analogist.

It is within the context of this effort to discern "primitive approximations to the dialectic of Marx and Lenin," then, that James begins to recast the slaves' revolution in the mold of a proletarian revolution. James arrived at the conclusion that the slaves of San Domingo approximated the modern proletariat independently, through his study of Marx and his analysis of the political economy of the plantation. Nonetheless, James was not alone in this effort. In the Atlanta lectures James recalls the almost conspiratorial thrill of reading W.E.B. Du Bois' account of the slave-led "General Strike" during the U.S. Civil War.[83] While it appears that James did not read Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* until after publishing *The Black Jacobins*, he seems to have

[83] James, "Lectures," 83-98.

found retroactive confirmation for some of his own theses in Du Bois' text.[84] In the lecture James seems pressed to convey the novelty of an historiographic maneuver which, by 1971, had perhaps lost some of its luster. Recalling for his audience that Du Bois' book begins with a chapter called "The Black Worker," James asks: "Who was thinking in terms of the black worker in 1865? Who was thinking about the black worker in 1935? Maybe ten people."[85] Continuing, James breathlessly recalls Du Bois' intervention in the larger discursive context of Marxist debate around the tactic of General Strike: "When did the idea of the general strike come into industry?" James asks his audience. "You ought to know that. It came in 1905 in Russia, where there were modern industries that were planted on the backward feudal economy…That was the first time a general strike had taken place: 1905. You read Rosa Luxemburg, you read Lenin, you read Kautsky, and they say this is a new method of proletarian struggle against capitalist society." The assumed novelty of this method of proletarian struggle is precisely what gives Du Bois' claim its political force: "He knew that in 1905 that was the historical development and it began there, but he says there was one *before* that. There was one by the slaves in the plantations. And *that* is the writing of history, that is the writing of history."[86]

James's reading of *Black Reconstruction* is clarifying, in part, because it affords Du Bois' account of the General Strike a symbolic significance in excess to the descriptive adequacy of

[84] James's phrasing throughout the lectures is ambiguous, making it difficult to determine when he read *Black Reconstruction*. James in *A History of Negro Revolt* seems to allude to Du Bois's thesis when he writes in the section on the Civil War that "it is claimed that there took place a sort of general strike, an immense sabotage, which helped to bring the South to its knees." In the lectures, however, he discusses how reading Du Bois influenced changes he made in footnotes for the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*. It therefore seems likely that James read *Black Reconstruction* in 1938, the year that both *The Black Jacobins* and *A History of Negro Revolt* were published, after completing the former and while drafting the latter. See *A History of Negro Revolt*, 60.

[85] James, "Lectures," 91.

[86] Ibid., 93.

the category of the proletarian. Beyond a technical classification, the figure of the proletarian is part of a strategy of "vindication": By invoking continuities between slaves and proletarians, James and Du Bois sought to make thinkable the agency and revolutionary capacity of subjects whose historical contributions had long been minimized and distorted. In the Atlanta lectures James explains that Du Bois' account of the general strike demonstrates the active role played by the slaves, not only in their own emancipation, but in the policies adopted by Abraham Lincoln and the overall direction of the war effort. In explicating the significance of this argument, James' tone becomes urgent, even combative:

> Without the blacks the war would not have been won. What I want to emphasize is that it was not only that the blacks brought their forces into the Northern army and gave labour. It was that the policies that they followed instinctively were the policies ultimately that Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet had to use in order to win the war. That is something entirely new in historical writing. I wonder if you understand it? I doubt it! You will in time, if you work hard at it. The policy by which Abraham Lincoln mobilized the blacks and the way in which they were mobilized against the South came from the instinctive action of the masses of the slaves. The only men I know, two men, have written about politics in that way. They are Marx and Lenin. That is very difficult for people to understand. The policy which Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet followed was to apply on a general scale and by governmental means what the black slaves were doing instinctively. I can't say it more, and I don't want to say it more or I might become offensive.[87]

James here goads his audience to grapple with a powerful, even "offensive," kind of historical knowledge that, he suggests, continues to pose an epistemological challenge in 1971. The challenge is that of conceptualizing the slave as an active agent in the unfolding of world historical events. James differentiates between an understanding of the slaves' exodus as a mere contribution of labor to the northern army, and a conception of this exodus as a social force that brings about a qualitative shift in Lincoln's strategy which deals the fatal blow to the South. On the latter interpretation, it is not Lincoln who frees the slaves, but the slaves who turn Lincoln's

[87] Ibid., 92-93.

army into a liberation army. The slaves' strike against the plantation economy exerts a decisive, and indeed determinative influence on the outcome and the purpose of the war. It is this emphasis on the slave as the leading agent or vanguard of revolutionary struggle that so impresses James. James's reading of Du Bois moreover shows that he considers the vindication of Black historical agency and the historical-comparative claim for proximity between the slave and the proletarian to be *inextricable* from one another. He does not divide historical knowledge into the science of historical materialism on one hand and the "figural" or allegorical depiction of Black agency on the other, but instead considers these to be entangled forms of historical truth, counterposed against a white supremacist historiographic tradition which has rendered Black resistance unthinkable. Indeed, James suggests that Du Bois did not set out to simply "apply" Marxism but instead mastered the material on the Civil War "and from that he drew what were the Marxist *conclusions.*"[88] Thus, the figuration of Black agency and the demonstration of quasi-proletarian revolutionary mobilization are part of a single historiographic revision, necessary corollaries in the struggle against the propaganda of history.

It should not by any means diminish the validity or the importance of this historiographic revision, however, to say that the revision itself has a history: As I have been trying to show, the entanglement of the idea of Black agency and the figure of the proletarian in the work of James and Du Bois is itself the product of what David Scott would call a particular historical "problem-space."[89] In the 1930s the figure of the proletarian is crucial for James, at least in part, because James assumes that the proletariat will serve as a vanguard in the conjoined African-World revolution. James' historiography is structured by what we might call, drawing on Reinhart

[88] Ibid., 91.

[89] Scott, *Conscripts*, 3.

Koselleck, a “horizon of proletarian expectation.”[90] Within this context the figure of the proletarian acquires a narrative significance exorbitant to its function as a sociological designation. The proletarian, that is, emerges as the protagonist in the great developmental metanarrative of world history, so that to define a figure as really or anticipatorily proletarian is to delegate them a role or a “part” to play within this great historical drama. James’ declaration that the slaves of Santo Domingo were “closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time” should thus be understood as continuous with his desire to “show that black people were able to make historical progress, they were able to show how a revolution was made, they were able to produce the men who could lead a revolution and write new pages in the book of history.”[91] Nikhil Pal Singh has suggested that Du Bois’ Black Reconstruction was “an effort to dramatize a social movement of black people into the new symbolic space of democratic history-making.”[92] Indeed, James’ analogy of the slave to the proletarian can be similarly read in Ranciére’s terms as an act of “hazardous subjectification,” a declaration of belonging to a community that “counts the uncounted.”[93] By inscribing the slaves into the historical metanarrative of the proletarian struggle James does not simply classify the slaves as proletarians in a technical sense but instead allows them “travel in the hazardous interval between material places and symbolic places.”[94] With this revolution of historical classifications and recasting of

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[90] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985)

[91] James, “Lectures,” 85.

[92]Nikhil Pal. Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 93.

[93] Rancière, *The Names of History*, 92-93.

[94] Ibid., 92.

historical roles James hopes by extension to place the struggles of colonial workers at the center of the contemporary class struggle.

Yet how exactly are we meant to understand the relation between this act of symbolic transvaluation and the historical specificity of the Haitian Revolution? How, moreover, do we square the emergent conception of New World slaves as anticipatory proletarians with the parallel interwar analogy of contemporary Black workers to slaves? Here, Ricoeur's observations about the contradictory valences of analogy become pertinent. It should strike us immediately that James' slave-proletarian analogy acquires its distinctive rhetorical power only against the backdrop of a political-economic context defined by the incomplete and delimited character of proletarianization on a global scale. Indeed, the scandal of the recognition that the slave *approximates* the proletarian depends upon a prior acknowledgement of difference between the slave and the proletarian. This rhetorical maneuver only becomes politically efficacious, then, when there arises an imperative to demonstrate relations of proximity or similitude between contemporary struggles which nonetheless remain distinct. Another way to put this would be to say that, for James, the analogy of the slave to a proletarian is an attempt to inscribe nonproletarian peoples into the historical metanarrative of progress with which proletarians are identified without assimilating those peoples into the same "laws" of political-economic development that obtain in the classically proletarian setting of the industrial metropole. By analogizing the slave to the proletarian—as opposed to, say, tracing the historical development of the contemporary Black proletariat in the metropole[95]—James expresses his faith in the revolutionary capacity of nonproletarian peoples.

[95] James of course also traced the development of the literal Black proletariat elsewhere, most influentially in his essays on the U.S. "Negro Question." See C. L. R. James and Scott. McLemee, *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996). ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University Press of

This is to say, then, that it is precisely the interaction between the multiple distinct figures of the analogy that is fundamental for a reading of James' text. Like the other forms and figures of labor studied throughout this dissertation, James' analogy is a translational act that sets in motion a transference of meaning between distinct semantic fields. While James invests more political optimism in the figure of the proletarian than any writer I've discussed thus far, then, this investment did not lead James to simply *take for granted* the proletarian as a static or self-evident category. I here diverge from critical readings that view *The Black Jacobins* as straightforwardly continuous with theories of class formation James elaborated in his writings on metropolitan labor. William Clare Roberts, for example, treats the slave-proletarian analogy in *The Black Jacobins* as an expression of the theory of class identity that James develops in his history of the *COMINTERN, World Revolution: 1917-1936*.[96] There, Roberts argues, James articulates a premise that social classes are "organically and internally identified, and that each has a preformed and unitary interest, which can be articulated as a set of political principles."[97] Class formation, for James, is "a non-existent problem because it has already occurred." James' comparison of the slaves of San Domingo to a modern proletariat thus follows from his "organic conception of the proletariat."[98]

This strikes me as a self-contradictory argument: James was able to see the slaves as San Domingo as "close to" a proletariat, somehow, because he assumes that social classes are always already formed. Roberts's reading epitomizes the problems that arise from failing to recognize

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Mississippi, 1996).

[96] William Clare Roberts, "Centralism is a Dangerous Tool: Leadership in C.L.R. James's History of Principles," *CLR James Journal* 26, ½ (2020): 219-240.

[97] Ibid., 221.

[98] Ibid.

the specifically comparative nature of James' claim. Like several other scholars mentioned above, Roberts mistakes an argument for proximity as one for identity. Yet to make the slaves' revolutionary mobilization historically intelligible by way of an assertion of temporal and conceptual proximity to a different class—in other words, by way of analogy—is precisely to work against an hypostasized understanding of class as always already constituted by preformed interests. In imputing to James an organicist and transhistorical understanding of the proletariat that "assimilates" the slaves of San Domingo, Roberts displaces the key conceptual problem at stake in the production of analogical meaning.[99] By conflating analogy with conceptual assimilation he ignores the translational work that James's analogy performs. To demonstrate this work is the aim of the analysis that follows.

*The Polyphony of Categories*

As it turns out, the proletarian is only one of a multitude of analogic figures James adopts in his narrative of the Haitian Revolution. Critics have tended to dwell on the figure of the proletarian to the exclusion of the other analogues. I want to argue, by contrast, for the interpretive imperative of situating the figure of the slave within a larger system of analogic relationships. The slave-proletarian analogy appears at the opening of Chapter 4, "The San Domingo Masses Begin." The opening lines of the chapter read:

> The slaves worked on the land, and like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.[100]

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[99] Ibid., 230.

[100] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 85.

This is already a more complex characterization than many of the scholarly readings mentioned above would lead us to expect. The slaves are likened not only to a modern proletariat, but also to "revolutionary peasants everywhere." We are thus being asked to think across not two, but three distinct models of insurgent subjectivity: the slave, the peasant, and the proletarian. Matters become even more complicated as the narrative progresses. Analogies proliferate as the revolutionary mobilization gathers momentum: "The slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie or the Luddite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew to be the cause of their sufferings."[101] James's account of the uprising thus appears as a kind of an historical montage, splicing and juxtaposing distinct moments from the history of global class struggle. While Cedric Robinson quotes the opening passage of Chapter IV to claim that James sees the social formation of the slaves as "the same" as that of Marxian proletariat, we might ask how the various analogues work together.[102] How does this mixed analogy, this "appositional collision" of times and subjectivities, shape the political meaning of James's text?[103]

One immediate consequence of James's proliferating analogies is to suggest the protean and volatile nature of class struggle in the colonial context. The fact that these analogies appear in the chapter on the uprising itself, rather than the earlier chapters dealing more extensively with the political economy of the plantation, is revealing: Rather than statements of sociological classification, these figures suggest a dynamic process of revolutionary class formation. The slaves in other words are shown to be forging a collective class consciousness through the

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[101] Ibid., 88.

[102] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 275.

[103] I am drawing the phrase appositional collision from Moten, "Not In Between: Lyric Painting, Visual History and the Postcolonial Future," 128.

process of revolutionary struggle itself: This is the very opposite of Roberts' notion of a "preformed and unitary interest." James's use of analogy suggests a process of collective self-creation that is protean, category-defying and generically unstable. No single class category can by itself contain the possibilities opened by the revolutionary process. The fact that they are slaves does not prevent the masses of San Domingo from planning and organizing a revolution in a manner approximating that of the proletariat; this organizational discipline does not in turn negate the idea that their aims are like those of a revolutionary peasantry. It is the very fact of being in motion between class categories that is crucial for James's vision of anticolonial revolution. In the messy and vertiginous traversal across these categories we can see what Peppino Ortoleva calls James's "non-deterministic Marxism":[104] The fact of belonging to one class does not determine in advance the forms the revolutionary struggle might take.

Much as he does in the account of the Watch Tower movement in *A History of Negro Revolt*, James in Chapter IV conveys historical meaning by way of proximity: The similarities and resonances that overcome the conventional definitions of distinct class strata are, in a sense, more important to him than those definitions themselves. Phrased in the language of literary studies, the "vehicle" is more important than the "tenor"; from the historian's vantage point of eminence, events far removed from one another in space and time can nonetheless help to disclose one another's latent meanings and possibilities. At the level of method, this means recoding events in terms not available to the historical subjects of struggle themselves. Yet James does not simply, like Hughes in "Always the Same," seek to demonstrate the class content of the revolution by asserting that slaves are workers and leaving it at that. The difference between similar and "the same" is a decisive difference: By opting for the former rather than the

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[104] Peppino Ortoleva, "A Profound Thinker" in *Urgent Tasks* 12 (Summer 1981), http://www.sojournertruth.net/rodney.html

latter, James is able to navigate more dynamically between the political discourses and practices he finds in his archive and the Marxist paradigm of class struggle that shapes his understanding of the overarching historical process. The notion of "close to" opens to view a dialogic interplay between discrepant modalities and idioms of resistance, showing how one putatively self-contained "class" can in fact shade into a fractured and impure form of another. James' analogic imaginary does not in this way erase real and consequential differences between distinct forms and idioms of struggle so much as it refuses to allow such differences to monopolize historical meaning.

This is, we might add, a distinctively diasporic Marxism: The kind of polyphonic interplay of political vernaculars I'm describing is closely related to the restless syncretism and creolization that Paul Gilroy identifies as defining features of a Black Atlantic cultural circulatory system.[105] In the first chapter, "The Property," James calls attention to the "latent possibilities" evidenced by the nightly ritual gathering where the slaves dance and sing an African Voodoo song:

Eh ! Eh ! Bomba ! Heu ! Heu !
Canga, bafio té !
Canga, mouné de lé !
Canga, do ki la !
Canga, li![106]

After excerpting the lyrics, James offers the following translation: "We swear to destroy the whites and all that they the possess; let us die rather than keep this vow."[107] It is through this

[105] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

[106] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 18.

[107] Ibid.

syncretic cultural practice, then, that the slaves begin to forge a collective oppositional culture that refuses the legitimacy of the plantation system.[108] The slaves cultivate this oppositional consciousness through repetition, nurturing a dream of liberation in nightly fugitive performance. James relates the story of Mackandal, the charismatic Voodoo priest who conceives a plan to "deliver his peoples by means of poison."[109] While Mackandal is discovered and ultimately executed, his conspiracy indicates the revolutionary potential of the slaves' prophetic religious culture. This account of the origins of Black radical consciousness, as Cedric Robinson observes, diverges from the Marxist developmental paradigm of revolutionary class formation. Unlike the European proletariat, the slaves of San Domingo forge their own "revolutionary culture" outside the influence of bourgeois ideology. For Robinson, this culture breaks with "the evolutionist chain, the closed dialectic, of historical materialism."[110] Indeed, James' account of Voodoo is crucial in part because it locates the fundamental basis of the revolution in a process of diasporic identity formation prior to the influence of the French Revolution. The latter, which becomes increasingly central to James' narrative in later chapters, does not therefore introduce the idea of revolution to the slaves *ex nihilo* but instead acts as a catalytic agent, activating the "latent possibilities" already immanent in their collective consciousness. The introduction of discourses of universal rights during the revolutionary period may in this sense be understood as continuous with a process of cultural exchange and syncretization already underway, rather than a moment of "education" or "radicalization" that inaugurates political struggle.

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[108] For more extensive treatment of Voodoo as a syncretic religion see Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

[109] Ibid., 21.

[110] Robinson, Black Marxism, 275-276.

The Voodoo song is crucial for James, moreover, because it indexes a potentiality that is transposable to the present: "For over two hundred years the slaves sang it at their meetings, as the Jews in Babylon sang of Zion, and the Bantu to-day sing in secret the national anthem of Africa."[111] With these dual analogies, James establishes a frame of allegorical reference that is epic and transnational in scope. The formation of a radical Black creole culture on the island of San Domingo harkens back to the archetypal story of exile—the Old Testament—and looks forward to the future anticolonial revolution in Africa. James's story is poised symbolically between the New World and Africa, between the origins of the capitalist world system and its anticipated future overthrow. With the allusion to Babylon, James taps into the syncretic and deeply allegorical cadences of Rastafarianism, drawing on the latter's tropes of exile and return. Not unlike the various Caribbean and African religious sects that envisioned anticolonial revolution as ordained by scripture, James links past to present in a relation of prefiguration and fulfillment: Haiti appears in this sense as the antetype of a liberated Africa.[112]

James introjects the lyrics of the Voodoo song again at the opening of Chapter IV, seemingly with the intent of drawing continuity between the slaves' ritual gathering and the large-scale mobilization of revolutionary forces. The lyrics stand in striking juxtaposition with James's modernist language of proletarian planning and organization. Here, James seems to suggest, the "latent possibilities" noted in the previous chapter explode to the surface: The song establishes a sense of ritual repetition and refrain, as though all those years of nightly gatherings

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[111] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 18.

[112] James engages with African religious discourses quite extensively in *A History of Negro Revolt*, 65-85. He also argued for the necessity of forging alliances with religious Pan-Africanists in a 1935 essay for the *New Statesmen*. It seems that the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia, in particular, created the condition for new coalitions between religious and Marxist Pan-Africanists. See Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*, 94. For an account of the development of Rastafarianism in the wake of Garveyism see Michael O. West, "Garveyism Root and Branch: From the Age of Revolution to the Onset of Black Power."

were a rehearsal for the revolution itself. Yet is Voodoo to be understood simply as preparatory and "primitive" cultural form whose efficacy is exhausted with the modern apotheosis of "planning" and "organization"? Far from it: As James demonstrates, Voodoo was "the medium of the conspiracy."[113] From the failure of Mackandal, James observes, the slaves have learned the necessity of mass coordination. A new revolutionary mobilization begins in 1791 in Le Cap, under the leadership of the High Priest Boukman. A plan is devised to set fire to the plantations on the outskirts of Le Cap, which will serve as a signal to the slaves in town to massacre the whites. While the slaves at Limbé rise prematurely and are quickly crushed, the governor cannot fathom the possibility of a mass coordinated uprising. Thus, the revolt proceeds largely according to plan. The slaves at Gallifet murder their masters and set fire to the plantation, triggering a chain of uprisings across the North plain. Within a month, the slaves are "masters of the countryside" and Toussaint Bréda is preparing to join. "They had travelled a long, long way," James writes, "since the grandiose poising schemes of Mackandal."[114]

Throughout this process of revolutionary mobilization, the political vernaculars of colony and metropole alchemize in volatile and unpredictable ways. While the representatives of the bourgeoisie in the French Constituent Assembly waver over the colonial question, the masses on both sides of the Atlantic appropriate the discourse of the Rights of Man to their own ends.[115] Some critics have adopted musical metaphors to describe the transatlantic interlocution of revolutionary movements in James's text. Edward Said's notion of a "fugue"-like movement in which events in France and Haiti "crisscross and refer to one another" seems, to my mind, to

[113] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

[114] Ibid., 86-90.

[115] Ibid., 81.

impute a false sense of orderly composition to this process;[116] Fred Moten's "collisive interplay" better captures the unruliness of the revolutionary contagion.[117] Shifting from the Jacobin club to San Domingo on the eve of revolution, James relates that the slaves "had heard of the revolution and construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inaccurate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."[118] "Inaccuracy," in other words, is immanent to the process of revolutionary meaning making; category mistakes are intrinsic to the revolution against the existing order. Against the bourgeoisie's false image of universal humanity that nonetheless excludes the slaves, the slaves pit the truthful inaccuracy of a universal revolution against slavery. For the former, a slave-led revolution is unthinkable; for the latter, it is all that is thinkable. The slaves' "error" of self-universalization is, as Moten might put it, a "phrasal disruption" of the line the bourgeoisie wants to draw between universal "Man" and human property.[119] Later, when the Parisian masses are converted to abolition, they answer the slaves' revolutionary (mis-)translation by refiguring planters as "aristocrats of the skin."[120] Slaves and sans-culottes, in Moten's terms, "cut and augment" the meanings of each other's revolutions.[121] The analogies they draw are irreverent, the comparisons haphazard and improvised; ideas are not only "circulated," they are uprooted, transposed, debased. This is

[116] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 279.

[117] Moten, "Not in Between," 131.

[118] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 81.

[119] Moten, "Not in Between," 129.

[120] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 120.

[121] Moten, "Not in Between," 131.

discourse without deliberation, translation without a dictionary: The hybridization of political discourses brings new "genres of human" into being.[122]

This "collisive interplay" of idioms and categories intensifies as the revolutionary narrative progresses, reaching a kind of crescendo in the fourth chapter. Revolutionary literature circulates on the plantations; French soldiers land at Port-au-Prince with news that the assembly has declared all men free and equal.[123] News from the metropole forms a combustible admixture with slaves' movements throughout the colonies. James lurches back and forth in time, troubling our sense of where and how the revolution begins. He repeatedly employs the past perfect tense to intercalate the slaves' uprisings into his narrative of the unfolding crisis in France, disrupting notions of historical progress as a linear temporal sequence. While parliament decides to preserve property, the slaves "had heard of the revolution and construed it in their own image." Pages later, after describing the escalation of tensions between big whites and small whites, James interrupts himself: "All took place in March 1791, but something else had also taken place. The French soldiers, on landing at Port-au-Prince, had given the fraternal embrace to all Mulattoes and Negroes…"[124] These backpedals upset the sequential logic of calendrical time, evoking a complex interweaving of distinct temporal rhythms.

By introjecting the lyrics of the Voodoo song at the opening of Chapter IV, James provokes a question of origins. This "phrasal disruption" superimposes the deep time of Pan-African revolt upon the more immediate catalyst of revolutionary upheaval. Moten describes *The*

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[122] I am drawing here on Sylvia Wynter's account of the struggle against colonial-bourgeois "genres of being human." See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The Centennial Review* 3.3 (Fall 2003): 257-337.

[123] Ibid., 83.

[124] Ibid., 81-83.

*Black Jacobins* as “a kind of anacrusis, a prefatory and dialectical bent not on/of dialectics…a dialectical bending of that dialectic that stems from a radical consciousness that cuts and anticipates, but is at the same time cut and anticipated by, Marxism.”[125] Following Moten, we might read the song as a “movement in the not in between of conditions and foundations.”[126] What can it mean, in other words, that at the onset of the slaves’ uprising we are at once jettisoned backwards to the nightly recitation and forward to the future proletarian revolution? Are we to understand this “prefatory note” as a claim that modern revolution “originates” in Voodoo, or does the song instead mark the “impossible location of the chain of [the revolution’s] origins”?[127] We know that at this point the slaves have “travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk; and now, since the revolution, to hear the political news and make their plans.”[128] James relates a dramatic meeting on the stormy night of the 22nd. There, Boukman exhorts the slaves to “throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speak in the hearts of us all.”[129] James does not tell us where precisely this “voice of liberty” originates, although context suggests an amalgam of native religious traditions and French revolutionary discourse. Indeed, James’s intercalating of Voodoo religious rites and “political news” frustrates any straightforward genetic narrative of origination and adaption. Rather than plotting the revolution as the unfolding of an idea with a single localized provenance, James performs what we might

[125] Moten, “Not In Between,” 132.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid.

[128] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

[129] Ibid., 87.

think of as a diasporic recasting of modern developmental time—a splicing and syncretizing of diverse temporalities within a single narrative frame.

James's thinking about hybrid historical temporalities, as many have observed, resonates with the concept of "combined and uneven development" articulated by Trotsky in the *History of the Revolution*. Drawing on the experience of Russia's revolutionary leap across the "intermediate stage" of bourgeois-led development, Trotsky argued that "the laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism."[130] Rather than reproducing a universal sequence of stages, the uneven expansion of global capitalism sets in motion various trajectories of "combined development," "by which we mean a drawing together of the difference stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms."[131] Trotsky emphasized that when "backwards" countries assimilate the technological and intellectual advancements of more developed societies they do "not follow them slavishly, reproducing all the stages of their past."[132] Even when technologies and concepts from the developed capitalist world are borrowed, they are then reprocessed, retrofitted, and re-"combined" in surprising and disjointed forms. It is precisely in this process of politico-economic and cultural hybridization that the distinctive logics of peripheral economic development can be grasped. Trotsky identified a paradoxical "privilege of historic backwardness": Because "backwards countries" are compelled to adopt the material and intellectual achievements of advanced societies "in advance of any specified date," their development "acquires a planless, complex, combined character."[133] This propulsive and chaotic

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[130] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 32.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 31.
[133] Ibid., 31-32.

movement is dramatically accelerated in a revolution, when events are "directly determined by swift, intense, and passionate changes in the psychology of classes."[134] James echoes Trotsky in the preface of *The Black Jacobins*, noting the historiographic challenge presented by the apparently chaotic nature of the revolutionary process: "In a revolution, when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinites caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came."[135]

Trotsky's notion of combined and uneven development can thus shed light on the complex splicing and syncretizing of historical temporalities in Chapter IV. Indeed, James's mixed and combinatory analogy can be aptly described as a figural "amalgam" of distinct stages of revolutionary history. On one hand, of course, these analogies are clearly products of the late 1930s: They are efforts to locate the Haitian Revolution in an overarching historical movement that extends into James's present, and even into the future. Yet the gambit of James's analogical materialism is that such long-distance comparisons yield a new perception of the "subsoil," the "very bones" of the historical past. The implicit corollary to this claim is the premise that a disruption of the classical sequence of stages is already immanent to the logic of the anticolonial revolution itself. James wants to see the historical particularity of the Haitian Revolution *through* its unique syncretizing and "drawing together" of distinct historical periods. The interpretive challenge for the reader thus lies in the effort to grasp the interrelation of these

[134] Ibid., 20.

[135] James, *The Black Jacobins*, X.

distinct historical periods as they combine in the "asynchronous simultaneity" of James's narrative.[136]

Taken together, the analogical figures James adopts in Chapter IV—the peasant, the jacquerie, the proletarian, and the Luddite wrecker—express a continuum of possibilities arising from the political-economic structure of the plantation. The figure of the proletarian, on one hand, seems to transpose James' narrative into an evolutionary timeline that stretches beyond the sequence of events contained within the chapter itself. The slaves, James tells us, are "closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time." This analogy asserts similitude by way of temporal proximity, positioning the slave within a developmental schema whose telos postdates the limited timespan of the literal narrative. Events acquires significance through a temporal deferral or displacement in which the present becomes "vehicle" that conveys the meaning of the past. Yet this historical comparison also has a more localized salience in James's narrative of events. The grounds for James's analogy lie in the social organization of the plantation workforce, which James crucially sees as creating the possibility for "planning" and "organization": "But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement."[137] It is here that the plantation appears most vividly as a prototype for the factory, achieving the scale, concentration, and socialization of labor which, in Lenin's

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[136] I am adopting Ernst Bloch's concept of the "non-simultaneity of the simultaneous." Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.)

[137] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 85-86.

prognosis, augur the accession of the proletariat to the role of revolutionary vanguard.[138] These essentially "modern" features of the plantation provide the infrastructure that allow Boukman to organize a large-scale attack involving a coordinated series of uprisings across the colony. It is significant too that James draws the comparison at this stage of the narrative, which marks a transition from the spasmodic and isolated revolts of the previous chapters into a coordinated and properly revolutionary struggle. The slaves' approximation to proletarian organization measures the distance they've travelled since the days of Mackandal.

Yet the future proletarian horizon does not entirely control or subsume the system of historical meanings structuring James' representation of Boukman's revolt. There are also the figures of the peasant, the Jacquerie, and the Luddite wrecker. These figures militate against the "modernizing" thrust of James's proletarian analogy, complicating a reading of the slaves' uprising as a prefiguration of the present. In the so-called "jacquerie" of 1358 thousands of peasants in northeast France, incensed by a tax increase, rose against the nobility, burning and ransacking castles, killing noblemen, and assaulting their families.[139] The word Jacquerie, which derived from the disparaging name "Jacques" applied by nobility to the peasantry, became a permanent term of opprobrium used by French upper classes to discredit any popular revolt as an act of mindless and wanton savagery.[140] The "Luddite wreckers," meanwhile, alludes to the technique of machine-wrecking practiced by British workers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a means of extracting concessions from their employers or, in the more commonly

[138] V.I. Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' Are and How they Fight the Social-Democrats," in Collected Works, Vol. 1, 1893-1894 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), 299.

[139] Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *The Jacquerie of 1358: A French Peasant's Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[140] James C. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition, Part I." Theory and Society, vol. 4, no. 1, 1977, pp. 1–38. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/656950. Accessed 6 Jun. 2022.

known examples, protesting the labor-saving machinery introduced by the industrial revolution.[141] Piling into James' clamoring mass of revolutionary analogues, medieval French peasant and preindustrial British worker expand the referential ambit of the text into an increasingly fractious coalition of historic struggles. This accumulation of analogues combines and telescopes struggles generally relegated to distinct historical "stages," opening a kind of symbolic crossroads within world revolutionary history.

If the figure of the proletarian signals the capacity for organization, the peasant, the wrecker and the jacquerie explicate the role of violence in the slaves' revolutionary struggle. Unlike Frantz Fanon's better-known analysis of revolutionary violence, which treats the latter as a necessity which arises out of the specific material and psychological violence of colonialism, James here establishes continuity between the violence of the Haitian revolution and certain phases of class struggle in Europe.[142] James also, of course, highlights the specific and barbaric violence of slavery, drawing attention to the planters' use of torture and murder as methods of discipline. He emphasizes that "from their masters [the slaves] had known rape, torture, degradation, and at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind." Thus, revolutionary violence for James is a logical and even necessary consequence of the violent conditions of enslavement. By drawing the external categories of Luddite and Jacquerie into the narrative, however, James also pushes against the notion that slaves' use of violence in the Haitian Revolution was singular or unique—a premise which had underwritten much racist propaganda on the revolution.[143] In turning to the Jacquerie and the Luddite, James deliberately calls

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[141] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The machine-breakers", *Past & Present* (February 1952): 57-70.

[142] Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963.)

[143] For an account of the "racialization of violence" in white depictions of the Haitian Revolution see Jeremy Teow "Black Revolt in the White Mind: Violence, Race, and Slave Agency in the British Reception of the Haitian Revolution, 1791–1805." Australasian Journal of American Studies 37, no. 1 (2018): 87–102.

attention to a pattern of "spasmodic" and violent uprisings typically characterized by both Marxist and conservative historians as reflexive, irrational outbursts. As Eric Hobsbawm writes in his study of "'primitive' forms of social agitation," these movements "have been treated largely as a series of episodes, punctuating the general story of humanity," in contrast to the developmental schema adopted for the study of the modern labor movement.[144] These are rearguard actions, fated to obsolescence, undertaken by subjects who lack a developed understanding of the forces against which they revolt. They are upheavals of the uncounted, actions of non-actors—struggles, in other words, conventionally excluded from the metanarrative of progress associated with the proletarian.

James's combination of these various dramatically combines and condensates distinct moments from the classical Marxist schema of revolutionary stages. The Jacquerie was a revolt against the "second estate" and in this sense an early premonition of the period of bourgeois revolution, that is, the literal subject of James' narrative. The Luddite, by contrast, evokes a moment of British industrialization more or less contemporaneous with the literal narrative but also—and this is crucial—prior to the generalization of the trade-union as the primary organizational modality of the labor movement. The tactic of machine-wrecking was distinguished from the latter by the goal of forestalling the "advance of technical progress" rather than, as was to become the aim of the trade-unions after full mechanization, "capturing" the machines for the benefit of workers.[145] This distinction is crucial insofar as it marks the dawning of the consciousness that the means of production can be "expropriated" and transformed into a

https://www.jstor.org/stable/26532955.

[144] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 1.

[145] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The machine-breakers", Past & Present (February 1952): 67

tool of emancipation. On James' account, the plantation concentrates labor on a scale that parallels the modern factory while simultaneously militating against the expropriative telos of the proletarian revolution: "If they had the slightest material interest in the plantations, they would not have destroyed so wantonly. But they had none."[146] The plantation appears to the slave, much as the factory does to the Luddite, as a force of dispossession and destruction that violently reorganizes collective life on a "modern" basis while systematically negating any possibility of positive social development—hence, this system must itself in turn be destroyed, rather than expropriated and harnessed for progressive social ends. Indeed, keen as James may be to reconceptualize the slaves as anticipatory proletarians, the analytic payoff of the comparison appears to be more or less limited to what it reveals about the *organizational form* of the slaves' uprising. However "planned" and "organized" the uprisings may be, the *aims* of the slaves remain "the extermination of their oppressors."[147] Their revolt in this sense is proletarian in form, but peasant in content.

It is widely acknowledged that *The Black Jacobins* was among the first Marxist texts to center the plantation in histories of global capitalist modernity. Given the broad historiographic consensus that has formed around the notion of the plantation as a capitalist institution, James's comparison of the slave to the proletarian may look less controversial to us now than it did in his time.[148] Yet it is precisely the hybridized and combinatory nature of James's analogy that makes it prescient of contemporary advances in Marxist theory. Jairus Banaji has recently proposed the following definition of the plantation: "the slave-plantations were capitalist enterprises of a

[146] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 90.

[147] Ibid., 85.

[148] For an overview of this debate see Chris Taylor, "The Plantation Road to Socialism." Amerikastudien / American Studies 62, no. 4 (2017): 551–65. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45134292.

patriarchal and feudal character producing absolute surplus-value on the basis of slave-labor and a monopoly of land." Banaji notes that this "heterogeneous and, as it appears, disarticulated nature of the slave-plantation generated a series of contradictory images when the early Marxist tradition…attempted its first characterizations."[149] James's analogies perhaps fit within the tradition of contradictory images that Banaji identifies. Yet by conceptualizing the slaves' revolt in terms of an analogical continuum that encompasses the jacquerie and the proletarian, James also identifies the "feudal-capitalist" contradiction internal to Banaji's definition. James' double analogy suggests that structural features of the slave labor process ("how the slaves work") may be distinguishable and even "disarticulated" from what are essentially quasi-industrial relations of production ("how they live") without negating the plantation's basically capitalist character. James can therefore be read as pushing against the "formalist" tendency, systematically critiqued by Banaji, which defines slavery as its own historically distinct mode of production.[150] In this sense James was correct in suggesting that the struggles of the 1930s offered a better vantage point for a study of the Haitian Revolution than had previously been available: The fever and the fret of James' moment did not cloud but clarified his perception of the past.

Moreover, James' mixed analogy gestures towards a contradiction whose ramifications extend well beyond the moment of revolutionary mobilization itself. If the structuring tension of "peasant" and "proletarian" figurations is temporarily resolved in the account of Boukman's initial uprising, the fissure between them widens in later chapters. As Toussaint L'Ouverture takes over leadership of the revolution, he faces the challenge of managing a transition from slavery in a society that nonetheless remains dependent on the plantation. If Boukman and

[149] Banaji, *Theory as History*, 71.

[150] Ibid., 45-103.

Mackandal cannot imagine a future with the plantation, Toussaint can't imagine one without it. Signs of later tensions are evident from James's initial characterization of Toussaint in Chapter IV. Following the news of the uprising from his post at the Bréda plantation, Toussaint appears already in this early moment as an ambivalent figure: "It seems certain that he had been in secret communication with the leaders, but like so many men of better education than the rank and file, he lacked their boldness at the moment of action and waited to see how things would go."[151] As steward of livestock on the plantation, trained in economics and experienced in administration, Toussaint cuts a striking contrast with the "peasant" destructiveness of Boukman: "Meanwhile, hating destruction, he kept his master's slaves in order and prevented the revolutionary labourers from setting fire to the plantation."[152] Here the tropes of disciplined organization earlier associated with the figure of the proletarian are identified instead with the administrative rationality of an "enlightened" Black elite. Toussaint of course does ultimately join the revolution, and quickly ascends to a position of leadership. Yet his vacillation in Chapter IV is a harbinger of difficulties to come.

Toussaint's challenge as a revolutionary leader who must also manage an economic transition represents something of an inversion of the initial uprising. While Boukman harnesses the built-in factory-like organization of the plantation system to coordinate its destruction, Toussaint seeks to re-channel these revolutionary forces into a disciplined but "free" plantation workforce. "The salvation of San Domingo," writes James, "lay in the restoration of agriculture."[153] Espousing the virtues of work, Toussaint employs military force to reconstruct

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[151] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 90.

[152] Ibid.

[153] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 155.

the plantation economy on the basis of wage labor. He imposes harsh penalties for refusal to work while also implementing a wage system. In the earlier stages of the revolution, he strives to placate white property owners, considering their "knowledge, education, and experience" necessary for economic restoration: "It was their plantations these whites wanted and he gave them their plantations, always reading to forget their treachery if they would work the land."[154] Later he institutes a military dictatorship to prevent marauders from destroying plantations and forces emancipated slaves back to work under the slogan "the ultimate guarantee of freedom was the prosperity of agriculture." James appears sympathetic with Toussaint's challenge, taking for granted the economic rationality embodied in the campaign: "The danger was that the blacks might slip into the practice of cultivating a small patch of land, producing just sufficient for their needs."[155]

Indeed, while James does not elaborate on the slaves' demands much beyond the "danger" it threatens, scholars like Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Adom Getachew, and Jean Casimir have placed slaves' efforts to reinstitute a peasant labor process at the very center of the revolution.[156] James, keen to show that the slaves are "subject to the same revolutionary laws as the advanced workers of revolutionary Paris," emphasizes their amenability to the militarized agriculture regime.[157] Yet he does not take for granted the inevitability of a transition to wage labor, nor does he erase its violence. Toussaint, he writes, was "battling with the colossal task of

[154] Ibid., 156.

[155] Ibid., 242.

[156] Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-Colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution"; Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation*; Jean Casimir, Laurent Dubois, and Walter Mignolo, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, Latin America in Translation/En Traducción/Em Tradução (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

[157] James, *The Black Jacobins*, 243.

transforming a slave population…into a community of free labourers, and he was doing it in the only way he could see."[158] Contra Roberts, then, "class formation" emerges as a and even *the* decisive problem in James's text. The freed peoples' "interests" are not "preformed and unitary" but a decisive arena of conflict. It can perhaps be argued that this conflict is not fully theorized but plays itself out in James's own ambivalence. If in Chapter IV James claims that the slaves had not "the slightest material interests in the plantations," his longer narrative of decolonization in many ways hinges on Toussaint's struggle to "[bind] the interests of the labourers to their work" through a combination of force, ideological reeducation, and wages.[159] We are thus confronted with the uncomfortable possibility of an unstated complicity between James's desire to see the slaves as proto-proletarian and Toussaint's struggle to literally transform the freed people into proletarians. Indeed, the fact that this figure appears only in the chapter on the revolution might be read as symptomatic of a conflict between its broadly accepted "literal" meaning—i.e., a dispossessed wage-laborer—and its specific salience for James as a signifier of revolutionary capacity. Within the context of the larger narrative, the term is something of a vanishing mediator, abolishing its own political usefulness just as the slaves wish to abolish the very system that permits them to "plan" and "organize" on a mass scale. The heroic figure that announces the onset of the revolution degenerates, through its literalization, into a program of counterrevolution.

David Scott has, in a close reading of James's revisions for the 1968 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, drawn attention to the tragedy of Toussaint's dilemma. Toussaint's vacillations on policy vis-à-vis France and the white colonists arise, on Scott's reading, from the tragic double-

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[158] Ibid., 242.

[159] Ibid.

bind of colonial modernity: The very same sense of affiliation with France and education in Enlightenment ideals that make Toussaint the ideal revolutionary leader transform, in a cruel twist, into shackles that doom his revolutionary policy.[160] There is a clear economic basis for this tragedy: Because Toussaint views the future of San Domingo as tethered to the successful restoration of the plantation economy, he adopts a policy of placation vis-à-vis white colonists that alienates the Black masses. A key turning point comes in Toussaint's response to the insurrection led by Moïse.[161] Carrying on the legacy of Boukman, Moise represents a constituency of emancipated people who object to returning to work for their white masters. While Toussaint refuses to break up the large estates, Moïse wants land grants for both junior officers and "even the rank-and-file." A long simmering conflict between two ideas of freedom bursts into the open. As James puts it: "This insurrection proved that [the free people] were following [Toussaint] because he represented that complete emancipation from their former degradation which was their chief goal. As soon as they saw that he was no longer going to this end, they were ready to throw him over."[162] The masses see their own interests in sharp opposition to Toussaint's program of placation and forbearance. James at this point downplays the deep-rooted economic foundations of the conflict, suggesting that the emancipated people would have been swayed to Toussaint's cause had he kept open better lines of communication. Yet Moise's revolt follows the pattern of violent rebellion that James previously coded as "peasant" in orientation. If in Boukman's uprising rational "planning" and revolutionary violence are temporarily harmonized, they are now starkly counterposed. Toussaint cannot reconcile these

[160] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 155.

[161] Ibid., 275.

[162] Ibid., 276.

two competing aspects of the revolutionary process: His tragedy arises from—and contributes to—the disarticulation of the two class trajectories condensed in James's analogy.

James near the beginning of *The Black Jacobins* portentously describes San Domingo as "a society torn by inner and out contradictions which in four years would split that structure into so many pieces that they could never be put together again."[163] As I have been suggesting, this process of fragmentation can be traced to the molecular level of James's analogies in Chapter IV: Even as they convey the enslaved masses' dramatic leap forward into revolutionary modernity, these figures also contain the conflicts of postcolonial development in embryonic form. Trouillot has described the revolutionary process in San Domingo as a fractious coalition of forces which would ultimately split into divergent trajectories of "state" and "nation":

> Hence, even though state and nation were taking shape at the same time and as part of the same revolutionary process, they were launched in opposite directions. State and nation were tied by the ideal of liberty, but the nation measured its liberty in Sunday markets and in the right to work on its garden plots. The Louverture party, on the other hand, embryo of the state-to-come and ferocious defender of this same liberty, was firmly attached to the plantation system. The leaders wanted export crops; the cultivators wanted land and food. The leaders wanted a country with plantations expanding on hundreds of acres; the cultivators dreamed simply of larger garden plots…In that situation, "independence"—the promise of a world without the French masters—barely papered over a deep misunderstanding. The politicians and ideologues who emerged during the struggle were busy sketching the themes of a nationalist discourse while the emerging national community, pushed into the background, was beginning to shape a peasant world view of its own.[164]

The disjuncture between state and nation that emerges in the first sovereign Black state in the Americas is itself, of course, not simply the result of misguided leadership but arises from the "subsoil" of the colonial plantation. Throughout the twentieth century, anticolonial movements and intellectuals would similarly contend with structures of economic dependency and

[163] Ibid., 57.

[164] Trouillot, Haiti, 44.

exploitation which, in the language of dependency theorists, "disarticulated" the social organism in the global periphery.[165] Not unlike James, these intellectuals would debate whether and to what extent conceptions of trade-union organization imported from the metropole were applicable to the scene of peripheral capitalism. While forged in preparation for a proletarian revolution, James's account more closely presages Frantz Fanon's admonishment to anticolonial labor leaders in the throes of decolonization: "The elite will attach a fundamental importance to organization, so much so that the fetish of organization will often take precedence over a reasoned study of colonial society…It is clear that innovations and adaptations ought to have been made."[166]

[165] Samir Amin, *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980)

[166] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 108.

## Conclusion: National Liberation as Permanent Revolution

My aim throughout this dissertation has been to trace the development of a global Black political and cultural tendency that overflows the borders of apparently opposed and self-contained transnational left formations. Rather than conceive Black labor politics simply as a subset of proletarian internationalism or, on the other hand, read Black writers' interwar engagements with Marxism as a temporary episode in the longer history of Black internationalism, I have attempted to identify the distinctive historical patterns and modalities of struggle that fostered the development of Black Labor Internationalism at the interstices of multiple global movements in the first half of the twentieth century. To be sure, Black Labor Internationalism has only briefly and intermittently taken organized political form, as in Padmore's ITCUNW and the International African Service Bureau. Nonetheless, the impact of this tendency cannot be measured by the longevity of these institutions. Viewed as a succession of brick-and-mortar organizations, Black Labor Internationalism may look simply like a handmaiden to the rise of anticolonial nationalism; viewed capaciously as a complex transnational matrix of radical intellectuals, organizing initiatives, and representational practices which overlap and interlace movements, it appears instead as an important subcurrent of Black political and intellectual history. Garveyism, the New Negro movement, the COMINTERN, and International African Service Bureau were the key incubators of Black Labor Internationalism in the interwar years. Yet this tendency has outlasted the various interwar political formations that fostered its early development.

I have previously suggested that Black Labor Internationalism inverted the previous historical trajectory of proletarian internationalism: Whereas the notion of an international working class developed first out of the material foundation of national labor parties, the vision of a Black international working class formed in advance of, and with the aim of hastening, the development of national labor movements in the Black colonial world. We might therefore expect to see a displacement or splintering of the ITCUNW model of coordinated Black transnational labor struggle as colonial labor movements undergo their own processes of nationalization in the wake of World War II. In the 1920s and '30s, national liberation and the class struggle were conceived as two sides of a single revolutionary process. Following

Lenin and Trotsky, Black Labor Internationalists contended that "bourgeois-democratic" revolutions in the colonial world could occur in a continuous sequence with the proletarian revolution and the transition to socialism. Related to this conception of combined asynchronous stages was the increased willingness of Black Labor Internationalists to engage with "bourgeois" nationalist movements as potential partners in anticolonial struggle.[1] From the critique of Garveyism through the analysis of racial antagonism in South Africa, the writers I have discussed continuously wrestled with the antinomies of class and nation, anticolonial struggle and class struggle. In contrast to Garvey, they emphasized the need to develop the forces of class struggle in the colonies. On the other hand, their analysis of colonial class formation occasionally suggested that national liberation formed a necessary precondition for the differentiation of social classes and the crystallization of class struggle.[2] In these years, however, the strength of the forces arrayed against anticolonial movements allowed for a deferral of the contradictions and strategic dilemmas immanent in the two modalities of struggle.

The imperative to forge a synthesis of Pan-Africanism and Communism arose, in sum, from the necessity of pursuing social transformation simultaneously at two scales, i.e., the exploited class and the oppressed nation. By the end of World War II, it had become evident that a global proletarian revolution was not forthcoming. At the same time, the onset of the Cold War opened opportunities to pursue programs of national self-determination which subsumed, avoided, or even clashed with the emancipatory demands of colonial labor movements.[3] It thus becomes important to return to our opening question: Was Black Labor Internationalism a "failed negation" of nationalism? Is it therefore to be

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[1] See for example C.L.R. James, "Editorial," International African Opinion 1.1 (July, 1938): 2. Harry Haywood's articulation of the Black Belt thesis and Wright's account of Black nationalism in the "Blueprint for Negro Writing" offer key articulations of this problematic in the U.S. context. See Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 230232.

[2] See for example George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1936), 334.

[3] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 78; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, African Studies Series 89 (Cambridge, [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

understood, as Goswami puts it, as a "staging ground for the modern developmental endpoint of the sovereign nation-state"?[4]

On the contrary: To conceive Black Labor Internationalism simply as an embryonic nationalism would obscure the continued efforts of Black anticolonial activists and intellectuals to coordinate global black labor struggles in the era of decolonization. Indeed, one could argue that it was only after World War II that the PROFINTERN's dream of a Black workers' international was finally realized. The Fifth Pan-African Congress of 1945, as we have seen, adopted a Marxist idiom with its call for "Colonial and Subject peoples of the world" to unite.[5] Moreover, the Pan-African Congress was not Padmore's only organizational endeavor in 1945. He also helped to coordinate a colonial delegation to the World Trade Union Conference of the newly founded World Federation of Trade Unions. Founded in Paris in 1945, the WFTU was to that point "the largest and most geographically extensive of any international trade union organization."[6] The federation—described by one scholar as the "high point of the world working class movement"— brought together delegates from 56 national organizations including the American CIO, the British TUC, and the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions of the USSR. Building on the momentum of the collective struggle against fascism in World War II, the 1945 conference achieved a temporary unity of forces which would soon splinter under the pressure of Cold War geopolitics.[7] From the perspective of WTFU organizers and delegates, 1945 seemed to augur a new era of global working-class strength and unity rather than a supersession of labor movements by national movements. The gathering of colonial trade union leaders at the London congress, recorded by Padmore in a pamphlet

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[4] Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms" The American Historical Review 117.5 (December 2012): 1461-1462.

[5] George Padmore, ed., *Colonial and Coloured Unity: A Program of Action; History of the Pan-African Congress* (Hammersmith: London, 1947)

[6] Andrew Herod, "Labor as an Agent of Globalization and as a Global Agent," in *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local*, ed. Andrew Herod (New York: Guilford Press, 1997): 167.

[7] Victor F. Devinatz, "A Cold War Thaw in the International Working Class Movement? The World Federation of Trade Unions and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 1967-1977," *Science & Society* 77.3 (July 2013): 342-371.

titled *The Voice of Coloured Labor*, breathed new life into the 1930s dream of an "international fighting organization" while at the same time establishing a framework for colonial labor internationalism outside the unilateral influence of the Soviet Union.[8]

The founding of the WFTU evinced a conviction that only global labor could enshrine the principles of equality and universal human rights espoused by the U.N. Charter, signed months earlier in San Francisco.[9] Along with demands for the recognition of workers' rights and the imperative to eradicate fascism, the constitution adopted at the 1945 conference included a resolution on the "people's right to self-determination."[10] The resolution was adopted after John Asfour of the Arab Workers' Society in Palestine and Ken Hill of the Jamaica Trade Union Council intervened in a discussion of the global peace settlement and pushed the colonial question onto the agenda. "It is unthinkable that this Conference should go on record as setting out its views on the Peace Settlement," stated Hill, "without taking into consideration colonial questions, which, we submit, are the root cause of war."[11] The adopted resolution affirmed that the victory over fascism "would indeed be but incomplete victory if the common people in the colonies and territories of all nations were now denied the full enjoyment of their inherent right of self-determination and national independence."[12] Despite the moral clarity of the early Soviet Union's commitment to anti-imperialism, no COMINTERN congress had generated anywhere close to this level of global mass support for self-determination. For the first time, it appeared that anti-imperialism was becoming a hegemonic position across the ranks of global labor. Padmore therefore viewed the conference as an opportunity to reestablish the bonds of metropolitan-colonial solidarity that had proved so tenuous and elusive in the 1930s. In the foreword to *The Voice of Coloured Labour*

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[8] George Padmore, *The Voice of Coloured Labour: Speeches and Reports of Colonial Delegates to the World Trade Union Conference-1945* (Oxford: PANAF Services Ltd 58, 1945).

[9] World Federation of Trade Unions, "History: The Founding Congress." http://www.wftucentral.org/history/

[10] Ibid., "Basic Aims and Objectives of the Founding Congress."

[11] Padmore, *The Voice of Coloured Labor*, 8.

[12] WFTU, "Basic Aims and Objectives," http://www.wftucentral.org/history/

Padmore declared that the conference was "Significant for the fact that in the first time in the history of international labour, Coloured colonial workers—the most oppressed and exploited section of the world proletariat—were given the opportunity of voicing their grievances and of expressing their hopes and aspirations through their trusted leaders."[13] Reviving his COMINTERN-era slogan, he wrote that "the white working-class trade movements of Europe and America, which have hitherto ignored the Coloured workers, are apparently beginning to recognize that 'Labour in the white skin cannot emancipate itself while Labor in the black skin is enslaved.' This awareness was manifested in drawing the long-neglected and forgotten millions of Colonial workers into the world fraternity of labour."[14]

Colonial delegates themselves manifested a cohesion and unity of purpose miles beyond the ITCUNW's fractious Conference of Negro Workers. As its title suggests, *The Voice of Coloured Labor* records a moment in which an increasingly confident and tenacious trade union leadership was emerging as a key medium of political expression for the global anticolonial struggle. The distance traveled from the 1930 conference can be measured by Padmore's choice to transcribe the speeches of delegates themselves rather than assign the task of political representation to a centralized revolutionary cadre. Colonial delegates at the WTUC included trade union leaders from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Jamaica, British Guiana, and Palestine. Figures like Hubert Critchlow of British Guiana, Wallace Johnson of Sierra Leone, and Ken Hill in Jamaica were the founders of their countries' first trade unions and labor parties; many of the assembled delegates would go on to play key roles in national independence movements and early postcolonial governments.

Colonial delegates' speeches made clear the necessarily political nature of labor struggle in the colonies: The totalitarian assemblage of pass laws, vagrancy regulations, penal sanctions and riotous assembly acts itemized so thoroughly by Padmore throughout the 1930s rendered any economistic abstraction of labor organization from political struggle impossible. As Padmore notes in the for

[13] Padmore, *The Voice of Coloured Labour*, 3.

[14] Ibid.

foreword, nearly all delegates had spent time in prison for their organizing efforts and campaigns for social reform. Wallace Johnson, president of the Sierra Leone Trade Union Congress, called on the conference to endorse demands for the abolition of the color bar, forced labor, and pass laws.[15] Delegates' speeches deployed arguments and political slogans popularized by Padmore throughout the '30s: The struggle against fascism was futile without the abolition of imperialism; as Johnson put it in an echo of *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, "Justice, like peace, is indivisible, and the world today cannot remain have slave and half free."[16] Hill's intervention in the discussion of the peace settlement clarified the political stakes of the conference. According to Hill, only an organized internationalist and anti-imperialist labor movement could form a bulwark against the return of fascism. To simply defeat fascist *governments* was not enough: "We must for further. We must take care that in our preoccupation with this historic task, we do not fail to take steps and use the influence of the international working-class movement to discontinue the system of Imperialism and Capitalist domination, whatever shape or form the take."[17]

The WFTU thus facilitated a powerful new rearticulation of colonial labor movements with the global struggle for self-determination. The establishment of a world trade union movement cutting across North-South and East-West geopolitical divisions seemed to offer a framework for a revival of working-class internationalism in the age of decolonization. Delegates harnessed the global forum of the 1945 congress both to strengthen the positions of their respective movements and to pursue projects of intercolonial federation. West African delegates initiated a plan to form a West African trade union Federation while Caribbean delegates worked towards an All-West Indian Federation of trade union organizations.[18] The WFTU in this way fostered affiliations both across the colonial world and between

[15] Ibid., 18-19.

[16] Ibid., 19.

[17] Ibid., 5.

[18] Ibid.

colony and metropole. Hubert Critchlow of British Guiana noted in his speech that “in the past the International labor movement was too much a European movement—a White Movement. And if the war has done nothing else it has taught us the lesson of the inter-dependence of our common struggle.”[19] At stake in the world federation of trade unions was not only the scale and composition of the international labor movement but the political content of decolonization. Padmore concludes in the forward to the pamphlet: “Inspired by what may promise to be to rebirth of the united labour movement, these black men from the far-flung parts of the British Empire have returned to their respective countries and are continuing with undiminished zeal the struggle not only for national liberation from the fetters of Imperialism, but also for the economic and social emancipation of the downtrodden workers and peasants for whom they speak.”[20]

Tensions between U.S., British, and Soviet governments soon led to the dissolution of the coalition that formed at the 1945 congress. Soviet and Western contingents accused one another of using the federation to pursue their own national interests. Devinatz lays responsibility for the schism on the pro-business AFL, which created a separate international trade union comprised only of Western unions to carry out the U.S. Marshall Plan. The western unions established a trade union advisory committee for the Marshall Plan which evolved into the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Meanwhile, Soviet and Eastern European union federations condemned the plan as a U.S. imperialist adventure.[21] The international labor movement was fractured once again by a new era of inter-imperial conflict. The future of Black Labor Internationalism, it was now clear, hinged on the autonomous and independent efforts of colonial workers’ movements.

Padmore’s remarks in the foreword to *The Voice of Coloured Labour* resuscitated the notion of combined or synchronous revolutions he had articulated in the interwar years. By assigning colonial trade

[19] Ibid., 37.

[20] Ibid., 5.

[21] Devinatz, “A Cold War Thaw,” 348.

union leaders the dual tasks of national liberation and social and economic emancipation, he transmitted the legacy of working-class internationalism into an age of ascendant anticolonial nationalism. This was a vision of national liberation as permanent revolution:[22] National independence, rather than proletarian action in the metropole, was now envisioned as the "detonator" of a cascading sequence of struggles which would culminate in a thoroughgoing "social and economic emancipation." The key difference from the interwar period was that self-determination now looked like an increasingly actionable program at the international level even while Cold War tensions impeded programs of international working-class solidarity. Paradoxically, the same geopolitical bifurcation that had undermined the efforts of the WFTU created new openings for the project of anticolonial nationalism. The bipolar international order of the Cold War, notes Getachew, "produced a set of constraints on the United States and European imperial powers, which were largely opposed to the right of self-determination, but were at least partly deferential to the anticolonial agenda in the hopes of not fully ceding the moral high ground on empire to the Soviet Union."[23] The double-edged sword of Cold War geopolitics thus seemed to open a path to independence while disarticulating self-determination from organized labor's demands for economic emancipation.

Padmore's post-WWII transition from global Black labor organizer to African independence leader emblematizes both the entanglements and the growing tensions between the two modalities of emancipation which he had, in the interwar years, viewed as necessarily and organically linked. Leslie James observes a tactical shift in Padmore's approach from the revolutionary politics of the 1930s to a more "respectable" and "liberal" approach after 1945.[24] As the dream of proletarian revolution faded, Padmore began to adopt a more strategic diplomatic posture towards the metropolitan powers. In the absence of a global revolutionary movement, observes James, Padmore believed that "Colonial independence could only be gained through the will of the imperial power…Padmore privileged British

[22] Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1931.)

[23]Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 78.

[24] James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*, 48.

public opinion over colonial opinion, reinforcing power with the imperial center and undermining colonial agency."[25] Padmore's new strategy of metropolitan diplomacy is evident in his effort to distance African independence movements from Communist influence in the 1956 text *Pan-Africanism or Communism*. While clearly informed in part by his own vexed history with the COMINTERN, Padmore's account of the relationship between Pan-Africanism and Communism in the text is also carefully calibrated to appeal to British public opinion. He thus continuously evokes the specter of a potential Communist influence while at the same time informing his readers that constitutional reforms and satisfaction of African peoples' material needs will ward off the threat of the "red bogey." If the Colonial Office pursued a policy based on the principle of national self-determination "by a process of gradual constitutional reform," he suggests, "it would be the most effective bulwark against Communism."[26]

Yet Padmore's diplomatic performance does not entirely contain or exhaust his interpretation of Marxist theory or even the history of organized Communism. In the opening author's note Padmore writes that "Pan-Africanism recognizes much that is true in the Marxist interpretation of history, since it provides a rational explanation for a good deal that would otherwise be unintelligible."[27] Later in the text, as we have seen, Padmore celebrates Lenin's endorsement of self-determination for oppressed peoples as a key catalyst for twentieth century anticolonialism. According to Padmore, Lenin's "grand gesture of offering self-determination to the non-Russian nationalities had a tremendous psychological effect upon the backward peoples not only in Asiatic Russia but throughout the Orient."[28] As Padmore emphasizes, moreover, this grand gesture constitutes a seminal revision of the Marxist theory of revolution. The "failure of the Western proletariat to come to the aid of the Soviet Republic" during the 1917-1922 civil

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[25] Ibid., 125.

[26] Padmore*, George Padmore, Pan-Africanism or Communism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc), xvii.

[27] Ibid.,xvi.

[28] Ibid., 271.

war “caused the Communists to turn to the East, in the hope of undermining European capitalism through Asia.”[29] The Soviet Union’s eastward pivot represented a “heretical departure from Orthodox Marxism—a kind of Leninist ‘Titoism.’ For according to Karl Marx, the proletarian revolution which was to usher in Communism would occur first in the highly developed countries where there existed the economic and social prerequisites as well as an educated and cultured industrial working class to form the foundations of Socialism.”[30] Lenin’s willingness to depart from this evolutionary narrative indicates, for Padmore, a flexibility that distinguishes him from European socialists. This account of Lenin’s anticolonial turn sets up the approbative account of Lenin’s “pragmatism” that I discussed in Chapter 3: “Seeing that the Western European workers were in no hurry to perform the historic role which Marx had assigned them in his Communist Manifesto, Lenin decided to forget about them and reach out to those who, still uncorrupted by capitalist reforms, yearned to break the fetters of imperialist domination.”[31]

I previously suggested that Padmore gives Lenin more credit than he’s due in his account of the Bolshevik leaders pragmatic heterodoxy. While Lenin did accord an increasingly important role to the colonial world in the global class struggle over the course of his tenure it is not the case, as Padmore states, that he “forgot” the Western proletariat or that he invested hope in the colonies on the basis of their lack of “corruption by capitalist reforms.” In the 1920 “Report on the Commission of the National and Colonial Questions” Lenin argued that the colonies’ transition to the Soviet system depended on the guidance of the metropolitan proletariat. “With the aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries,” he stated, “the backward countries can go over to the Soviet system and, through certain stages of development, to communism, without having to passthrough the capitalist stage.”[32] Yet, given the anticommunist thrust of the text, Padmore’s celebration of Lenin’s anticolonialism demands explanation.

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[29] Ibid., 272.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Lenin, “Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions,”139.

If Padmore attributes a more thoroughgoing critique of "orthodox Marxism" to Lenin than is merited, what accounts for this exaggeration?

It appears, on one hand, that Padmore's account of Lenin is informed by the diplomatic imperatives of his text. His emphasis on the "tremendous psychological effect" of Lenin's endorsement of self-determination, for example, aims to persuade British readers of the need to hasten the process of constitutional reform in the direction of African sovereignty. If British policymakers take heed of Lenin's example and "honestly and vigorously" pursue such reforms, according to the logic of the appeal Padmore makes in the preface, "it would be the most effective bulwark against Communism."[33] That Lenin's colonial policy was ultimately abandoned makes him a safe exemplar of a potential Communist influence that urges the need for action; at the same time, this influence is historically distant enough to assuage British anxieties. Lenin thus becomes something of a floating signifier, an amalgam of lost revolutionary possibilities and contemporary practical considerations. Lenin's pragmatism on one hand becomes a harbinger of Padmore's Cold War efforts to reorient African socialism outside of Soviet influence. The allusion to the socialist Yugoslavian leader Josep Broz Tito in the phrase "Leninist Titoism" paradoxically figures Lenin, founder of the COMINTERN, as forerunner of socialist states' efforts to politically separate themselves from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, by representing Lenin as the architect of a revolutionary anticolonialism that Padmore claims is no longer an active element of Soviet policy, he also renders him available for a symbolic transvaluation that exceeds these pragmatic concerns, and indeed risks upsetting the book's diplomatic posture. We might ask, in other words, whether Padmore's quasi-mythical Lenin affords a glimmer, in a refraction of past through the present, of an enduring vision of African independence as a revolutionary challenge to the capitalist world system at the dawn of the Cold War.

Indeed, the vision of national liberation as permanent revolution would guide anticolonial movements and thinkers throughout the twentieth century. From Frantz Fanon's notion of decolonization

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[33] Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism*, xviii

as a "program of complete disorder" to Richard Wright's prediction at the Bandung Conference of a global "de-Occidentalization of mankind," the process of decolonization was conceived as an historic rupture which, by undermining the imperial foundations of the global capitalist system, would force a global transition to a new social order.[34] The revolutions in practice produced revolutions in theory: Disabused of the metropolitan vanguardism that guided international socialism in the interwar years, anticolonial Marxists now re-imagined the revolution as moving "from periphery to center."[35] In his analysis of Kwame Nkrumah and the Ghana revolution James looked back on the years of the African Service Bureau and excoriated the "myth" that freedom would be "given" to Africans.[36] Even *The Black Jacobins*, James admitted, "constantly implied that the African revolution would be similarly contingent upon the socialist revolution in Europe."[37] Yet now, after the revolution, it was clear that the masses of Ghana were "the vanguard of the twentieth century."[38]

In 1960 James, serving as secretary of the West Indian Federal Labour Party, delivered a speech in Accra on the topic "Imperialism and underdeveloped countries: Who are the backward ones?"[39] He declared that the antiimperialist policies of Nkrumah "if followed by the great labour and socialist movements of the world are the policies which could lead not only to the emancipation of Africa but to the emancipation of the whole of modern society from the terrible evils from which they are suffering at

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[34] Frantz Fanon and Richard Philcox, *The Wretched of the Earth: Frantz Fanon ; Translated from the French by Richard Philcox ; Introductions by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 36. Richard Wright, Richard Wright, and Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power, The Color Curtain, and White Man, Listen!*, 1st ed, Harper Perennial Modern Classics (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 594.

[35] Walter Rodney, "The African Revolution," *Urgent Tasks* (March 1972).

[36] C. L. R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Westport, Conn: L. Hill, 1977), 68.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 91.

[39] Ibid., 161.

the present time."[40] Raising his voice above a growing chorus of applause, James placed Nkrumah in a lineage of revolutionaries tracing back to Marx: "What I want to say is that if that policy were adopted by the labour and socialist elements of the most advanced countries of the world it will not roll over Africa alone but it will lead to the emancipation of all oppressed peoples and classes in every section of the globe…I don't say yesterday, I don't say tomorrow, but I say today, the centre of the world revolutionary struggle is here in Accra, Ghana."[41] This was a dramatic reversal of the "advanced-backwards" axiology, the temporal hierarchy that had guided international socialism in the interwar years. It was a reversal, but also a revival: James's speech carried forward the legacy and the dream of "economic and social emancipation of the downtrodden workers and peasants" voiced in the 1945 conference, itself a revoicing of the 1930 Conference of Negro Workers. The tendency born in the interwar years once again modulated, took on a new form and a new life: The anticolonial revolution transposed the efforts of Black Labor Internationalists into a new era of struggle.

[40] Ibid., 162.

[41] Ibid., 162-164.

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