

Deterritorializing White Community Through Claude McKay's Poems

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Abstract

Since the beginning of African-American movement, the idea of enslaving African-Americans by white Western Europeans was shaped in colonial America. Its consequence was the suppression of the black race and the false assumption of white race who considered themselves as superior race in their own territory. Yet the African-American community did not remain silent, and struggled to prove themselves as talented as other races. They converged in Harlem and celebrated their culture, proud of being black. Claude McKay was one of those dominant figures who showed his anger through the selfish white community. There is aimed to verify the ways in which McKay through his poems attacked the cruel act of white race and how he deterritorialized their territory. To do so, the issue will be discussed in light of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of Deterritorialization.

Keywords: Deleuze, Guattari , Deterritorialization , Claude McKay.

Introduction

Claude McKay was the first poet acclaimed for his writing in Jamaican dialect and the first black writer to receive the Medal of the Jamaica Institute of Arts and Sciences. He wrote the first book of poetry identified with the Harlem Renaissance, a book that expressed the righteous anger of the New Negro. He was also the first black writer who wrote a novel that made the best-seller lists in the United States. The poems he published in "*Harlem Shadows*" included his most militant indictments of racial injustice, sonnets such as "*The White House*," "*America*," and "*Enslaved*," whose passionate, often violent rhetoric contrasts dramatically with their formal properties. The tension between emotional intensity and formal restraint is inscribed within the metric feet of poems like "*The White House*".

Claude McKay's "*The White House*" remains as one of the most scathing send-ups of white middle-class values in the Harlem Renaissance. McKay expresses his thorough discontent with the United States' segregation. In this poem and some other poems like: "*The Negro's Friend*" and "*If We Must Die*" he specifically singles out American big-industry. The poet garnered lots of attention because he surpassed his contemporaries in denouncing the racial hypocrisy of American white people. Based on his poems, this paper aims to illustrate how McKay sharpens his anger with disillusionment and discontent to break the shuttered doors of glass in light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Deterritorialization.

From his youth, McKay had a chance to be educated through the support of his brother U.Theo McKay who was a schoolteacher and Walter Jekyll, an English-born gentleman who was a scholar of Jamaican folklore. Their influence opened his eyes to the predicaments of his environmental situation and enhanced his awareness which was reflected in his early poems. The opening lines of "Quashie to Buccra" embody how he expressed the social and psychological impacts of rural poverty through the voice of Jamaica farm workers:

*You tas'e petater an'you say it sweet,
But you no know how hard we wuk fe it.
Yet still de hardship always melt away
Wheneber it come roun'to reapin.Day*

Gallantly, he sings the toils and hardships that "naygur man" (the black laborer) have to tolerate and being treated harshly and unappreciated by the "buccra" (the white man).

Due to his frank language of controversial racial and colonial issues, McKay gained the reputation of "Jamaica Bobby Burns" by Jekyll.

In his poem "*The White House*", one can feel his anger from the very beginning line:

*"Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;"*

The title of this poem is referring to the white race and the house refers to the community and establishment of the whites. Not only the inhabitants are white, but also the laws and rules that legislate are according to the white tastes and wills. McKay wants to break this force and discrimination. He claims in this poem that he is courage enough to "bear" his anger and deconstruct the territory that white people create for him and other black individuals. According to Hottois, "deconstruction refers to all of

the techniques and strategies used by Derrida in order to destabilize, crack open and displace texts that are explicitly or invisibly idealistic”. Reading McKay’s poems in light of Derridian’s deconstruction exerts that any conceptual oppositions like masculine/ feminine, white /black, superiority/inferiority should be bypassed and treating concepts as if some are different from others is a useless act.

Indeed, reactions through cruelty and injustice are not the same. Some like Frantz Fanon believe in a violent response or revolutionary. Fanon utilized his lived involvement as a progressive in Algeria to build up a hypothesis of revolution. So for Fanon it is completely vital that revolutionary must be utilized to free the colonized condition of the pioneer control. However, violence has its own harms. There is a substantial human cost to revolutions. Discussing frustration in “*The Wretched of the Earth*”, he notes that “when the native is tortured, when his wife is killed or raped, he complains to no one”. According to Fanon it is not the end of revolution, for the physical and psychological consequences of violence remains. He asserts that “The militant who faces the colonialist war machine with the bare minimum of arms realizes that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up yet another system of exploitation. This discovery is unpleasant, bitter, and sickening; and yet everything seemed so simple before.”

Fanon affirms that initiating an upheaval and creating a new cultural identity is not an easy task but is the one and only way of removing the violations of white oppressors over the oppressed blacks. In another perspective these social and cultural revolutions can be attributed to the Michel Foucault’s notion of power. Power for Foucault is what make individuals what they are and has a different concept from other theories. According to Gavenda “his work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them.” According to Foucault, “Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure.” Considering Claude McKay’s poems the rage that erupts due to the racial segregation, leads the evolution of Foucaultian power. As the colored people could not wait anymore for the factitious promises, they deconstruct the white norms and rules within the system or territory that white society framed. The consequence would be the ambulation of power from oppressors to oppressed. Borrowing King, Martin Luther Jr.’s expression “the word “Wait” rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never”.” He

continues “We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

In his poem “The Negro’s Friend”, McKay sings:

“What waste of time to cry: “No Segregation!”
When it exists in stark reality,
Both North and South, throughout this total nation,
The state decreed by white authority.”

The words “North” and “south” in this part of the poems can be interpreted through Derrida’s concept of “binary oppositions”. Derrida believed that there is no true opposition between a pair of conceptions.

Related to McKay’s poems it is necessary to hint Foucault’s term of Biopower which literally means having power over bodies. Foucault describes the terms as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation's of bodies and the control of populations”. Moreover in his lectures on Biopower entitled “*Security, Territory, Population*” delivered at the Collège de France between January and April 1978 he asserts:

“By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower.”

While explosion deconstructs things from outside, implosion does the same from inside. In the case of McKay’s poems, the affect of black’s irritation is an implosion that happens within the territory which is so breakable and fragile.

Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern world is also one of radical implosion in which social classes, genders, political differences, and one-autonomous realms of society and culture collapse into each other, erasing previously boundaries and differences. Chapter 5 of a book entitled “The Jean Baudrillard Reader” by Steve Redhead, comprises extracts of Baudrillard's writings about implosion and deterrence. For Baudrillard, in the society of simulation, economics , politics , culture , sexuality , and the social all implode into each other such that economics is fundamentally constituted by culture , politics , and other spheres , while art , once a sphere of potential difference and opposition , is absorbed into the economic and political and sexuality is everywhere. In this situation, difference between individuals and groups implode in a rapidly mutating dissolution of the social and the

previous boundaries and structures upon which social theory had once focused.

According to Foucault and Baudrillard's vision of explosion and implosion, Claude McKay artistically shapes a black territory for the black community in his poem "The Negro's Tragedy" and does not allow any white race enters to it. In two parts of this poem he excludes the "white man" from his territory which is metaphorically his poem.

*"Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from the other men."*

In the sestet, the "white man" is excluded, from writing his book, which is "shot out of his blood."

*"So what I write is shot out of my blood.
There is no white man who could write my book
Though many think the story can be told
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.
Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.
This Negro laughs, and prays to God for Light!"*

White men cannot do McKay's writing for him. Nor can they rightly perceive the "Negro's tragedy" or his territory and the way it needs to be answered. This black territory is a response to what white community did to them. As Martin Luther claims it is about 340 years that colored people brooked this physical and mental pressure. Eventually, their patience runs over and it is their time to evacuate their wrath and agony toward white territory.

Deleuze and Guattari in their book *"A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia"* talk about the anthropological literature in which tribal societies mark bodies in initiation ceremonies, so that the products of an organ are traced to a clan, which is mythically traced to the earth or, more precisely, one of its enchanted regions, which function as the organs on the full body of the earth. Material flows are thus "territorialized," that is, traced onto the earth, which is credited as the source of all production. The signs in tribal inscription are not signifiers. They do not map onto a voice, but enact a "savage triangle forming ... a theater of cruelty that implies the triple independence of the articulated voice, the graphic hand and the appreciative eye". Empires overcode these tribal meaning codes, tracing production back to the despot, the divine father of his people. Material flows in despotism

empires are thus “deterritorialized”, they are no longer credited to the earth, and then immediately “reterritorialized” on the body of the despot, who assumes credit for all production. When tribal signs are overcoded, the signifier is formed as a “deterritorialized sign” allowing for communication between the conquered and the conquerors.

In chapter 9 of “*Anti-Oedipus*” entitled *The Civilized Capitalist Machine* Deleuze and Guattari declare that “The first great movement of deterritorialization appears with the overcoding performed by the despotic State.” They believe that the action of decoded is not enough, and it needs a new break to cross and change the extant situation. Activities which cause decoded flows hit the tyrannical State with inactivity and submerge the dictator.

They also mention in the same chapter what Marx points at the heart of Capital. According to Marx there are two principle items in this case: on one hand the deterritorialized laborers who has turned out to be free and stripped in selling his work capacity, and on the other hand decoded money that has turned out to be capital and is capable of buying it. Besides, each of these components brings into play a few procedures of interpreting and deterritorialization having altogether different origins. For a free laborer it means “the deterritorialization of the soil through privatization; the decoding of the instruments of production through appropriation; the loss of the means of consumption through the dissolution of the family and the corporation; and finally, the decoding of the worker in favor of the work itself or of the machine.” Conversely for capital it means “the deterritorialization of wealth through monetary abstraction; the decoding of the flows of production through merchant capital; the decoding of States through financial capital and public debts; the decoding of the means of production through the formation of industrial capital; and so on.”

Giddens also defines deterritorialization as a central element of globalization, infers the developing presence of social types of contact and contribution which go beyond the limits of a particular territory, a sort of “weighing of anchors” of social relations, which takes us to a closer association with the external, which produces closeness in distance, and to a relative farness from what is close.

Traces of deterritorialization, deforming, decoding and radical acts are elaborately depicted in Claude McKay’s poems. Unlike many other Harlem Renaissance writers and poets McKay often writes with rage and a call to action. This calling to action is nothing but deterritorialization, a rebellious act. John Joseph Lalor defines rebellion as “a refusal of obedience or order.” He said “it may encompass a range of behaviors from civil disobedience and mass nonviolent resistance, to violent and organized attempts to destroy an established authority such as the government. Those

who participate in rebellions are known as “rebels”. A Rebel is a person who refuses allegiance to, resists, or rises in arms against the government or ruler of his or her country, resists any authority, control, or tradition and who show or feel utter repugnance.” McKay yells in his poems how black community act patiently and intelligently to deterritorialize the white community by their own strategies and at last they succeeded to achieve what they wanted to gain for many years.

In “*If We Must Die*” McKay argues not only how he feels pride to be an African American but also how alienated he was because of his race. This poem was composed as a reaction to what is presently called the Red Summer of 1919. During this summer, there was a rise in race uproars and general violence toward the black community. The most violent actions happened in Chicago, Washington D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas. This violence comprised battling and revolting that led to losing the homes of black families and several deaths. The speaker who is McKay in this poem seems to be the leader whose speeches are considered as a pre-battle to motivate his people to rebel and fight. Although they are condemned to die but there is still a hope for them how to die.

*“If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!”*

McKay asserts in this poem that even in the worst situation, they can live proudly with dignity. This way of thinking is a radical and revolutionary in this poem. Even in dying he “fights back” till his last moment.

*“Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”*

Chapter 10 of George Ritzer and Douglas J. Goodman’s book entitled “*Classical Sociological Theory*” appertain to W.E.B. Du Bois’s theoretical contribution on race. Early in his career Du Bois claimed that the “race idea” was the central thought of all history and that the primary “problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line.” Du Bois viewed the goal of African Americans not as one of integration or absorption into white America, but one of advancing “Pan-Negroism.” He also introduced the concept of double consciousness in his book “*The Souls of Black Folk*”. Du Bois hoped his work would allow whites to glimpse behind the Veil, so they could begin to understand the black experience in America. Blacks are simultaneously both inside and outside of the dominant white society and

live with a feeling of "twoness." Although economics and social class played a large role in the early work of Du Bois, later in his career he began to view racism as a consequence of the capitalist mode of production. While early in his career Du Bois was an active participant in black reform organizations like the NAACP, he eventually began to advocate a Marxian revolution of the economic system as the only hope for blacks to achieve equality in America.

Related to what explained above, the notion of identity can be also attributed to most of his poems and surely to the discussed ones. In his poems McKay not only attempts to deterritorialize the white community, but also intends to depict that colored people have their own identity and difference in skin colors cannot devalue their personality from them. This concept of identity is not only shown in his poems but also in his novels. As an example "*Banana Bottom*" and "*Home to Harlem*" are said to follow a principal theme of a black individual in search of establishing a cultural identity in a white society. They discuss underlying racial and cultural tension as well.

McKay's poem "*After the winter*" resembles to Yeats' "*The lake Isle of Innisfree*". In both, the poets indicate a call to return to nature-based simplicity and in the context of the poem overall, a "summer isle" much like McKay's native Jamaica. It seems that they both wish to flee to a better place in search of their true identity and their tranquility. "*After the winter*" is an appropriate example which gives a better understanding of McKay's concept of identity through the companionship and strengthened link to the Caribbean that the poem offers. At the time that McKay was writing "*After the Winter*", Ireland was gaining independence from England, the same power that colonized Jamaica. Lee M. Jenkin links Ireland's search for independence as similar and utilizable to black America's search for equal rights.

The clues of the concept of identity can be traced in McKay's poem "*If We Must Die*", too. The poem navigates a complex sense of identity that cannot be narrowed down to one place or one concept of race. "*If We Must Die*", is presented in the current Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, illustrating the continued need for a push to equality and identity.

As a conclusion it is worth to mention again that in addition to giving a voice to black immigrants, McKay was one of the first African-American poets of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, he influenced later poets, including Langston Hughes. He paved the way for black poets to discuss the conditions and racism that they faced in their poems. He transitioned on May 22, 1948 while he lived in Chicago. McKay is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, Queens, New York. Inscribed on his headstone are the words: "Peace, O My Rebel Heart".

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