

John Claborn: On "Mulatto"

Reading McKay's traditional poetics alongside his contemporary Langston Hughes's open-form, experimental poetics brings out the specificity of the sonnet's formalizing force. Consider Hughes's "Mulatto" (1927) and McKay's earlier 1925 sonnet, "The Mulatto." Since slavery, the problem of the mulatto child disavowed by his/her white father-master has been a site of intense emotion and trauma—a problem that these two poems address head-on from the perspective of the mulatto son. Hughes's "Mulatto" embraces a hybrid form structured by interpolations, multiple voices, and polyphony—in short, the poem is "mulatto" in form as well as content. McKay's raging sonnet could not be more different: in tapping the "white" tradition of the Shakespearean sonnet's iambic pentameter, *a b a b c d c d e f e f g g* rhyme scheme, the poem at first seems constrained and less formally inventive than Hughes's. Although McKay's black voice singing in a borrowed white key is in a sense "mulatto," its unambiguously raging tone and the sonnet's overall worldview of warring, "unreconciled" binaries—love and hate, black and white, kill or be killed—follow a logic of synthesis that significantly differs from Hughes's jazzier mix of poetic voice.

Initially, Hughes's poem seems to break down into three voices (father, son, and an elusive third voice) that cut in and mutually interrupt each other, causing abrupt shifts in style and tone that, in the end, disarticulate voice from identity. In the opening lines, the son asserts his mulatto identity and pleads for recognition from his white father. The unnamed son's address to a generic "white man" suggests that his voice oscillates between the particular and the general, between the son as individual and the son as representative of all mulattos:

I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk

And the turpentine woods.

One of the pillars of the temple fell.

You are my son!

Like hell!

(1-6)

Instead of immediately giving us the father's response to his son's accusatory plea, the poem then shifts to an "objective," racially unmarked voice that describes the natural setting of the "Georgia dusk / And the turpentine woods" (2-3). While this three line interpolation give us terms "dusk and turpentine" that signify nature's own color-mixing of night and day, it also folds back in on the father-son dialogue and naturalizes the supposed unnaturalness of racial mixing. Some of these more descriptive lines show nature as constantly commingling: the night is full of mulattoed "Great big yellow stars" (10) and mixed smells: "The scent of pine

wood stings the soft night air? (18). The fourth line's mysterious reference to a partially ruined temple—only "One of the pillars of the temple fell"—disrupts our expectations about the action's geographical location in Georgia: where are there temples in Georgia? Given Hughes's concern with ancient Africa/Egypt in "Negro" (1922) and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), the temple obliquely evokes these ancient ruins, thus interjecting into the poem a subtle yet trans-historical, trans-geographical twist: a collapsing of distance in space and time. This third, descriptive voice, seemingly transcendent, then hovers over the father-son dialogue throughout the rest of the poem. As the poem unfolds, it deconstructs itself. The father's voice becomes more ambiguous, making it difficult to discern his from the son's. His initial response to and denial of his son—"You are my son! / Like hell!"—inadvertently betrays some level of recognition that begins to destabilize the father's identity. When the father asks, "What's a body but a toy?" (11), the abrupt shift to a macabre jingle about bruised black bodies suggests that another unidentified voice answers the father's question, though presumably in a way that would be satisfactory to the father:

Juicy bodies

Of nigger wenches

Blue black

Against black fences (12-15).

Perhaps as a surging up of the father's and son's mutual unconscious, a memory triggered by the "Sharp pine scent in the evening air" (22) mentioned later, these lines return the poem to the primal, traumatic rape scene of the son's conception. Yet even as the father repeats his question, implying an association of the female black body with mere toys, this voice of the unconscious interpolates another song:

A nigger night,

A nigger joy,

A little yellow

Bastard boy (23-26).

The "joy" both folds back on the night of conception—the rape of the mother-toy—and plunges forward into the mulatto "Bastard boy," thus forming a toy-joy-boy rhyming constellation. The playful tone of the songs and the toy-joy-boy rhyme suggest that the father's feelings towards his son vacillate, thus defusing any straightforward rejection, even if lines like "*Git on back there in the night, / You ain't white*" imply such a rejection (36-37). Unlike the speaker in McKay's poem, who sets out to murder his father, the problem for Hughes seems to involve mutual recognition, or rather a conscious recognition of an unconscious recognition—an overcoming of a repressed recognition that the white father must feel at some level. The poem's unrecognizable form, too, demands recognition from readers more familiar with conventional forms like the sonnet. Although the poem ends on an ambiguous note, leaving the son to continue his pleading, its mix of mutually haunting voices at least implies that some

kind of reconciliation is possible. In McKay's "Mulatto," the father-son forces cannot be reconciled or rescued by the identity-vertigo induced by the work of interpolation in Hughes's poem. Hughes's poem may sit more comfortably than McKay's with those who value becoming and ambiguity, fluidity, and the interconnectedness of all things which, in turn, supposedly corresponds to a socialist-democratic politics of pluralism and openness. McKay's poem, on the other hand, challenges us to rethink this melting pot ontology of becoming and its political efficacy, to think a world where reconciling might mean murdering. In its blunt acceptance of violence, the poem is Fanonian decades before Frantz Fanon, the Caribbean-born revolutionary who advocated the use of violence to overthrow colonial regimes:

Because I am the white man's son?his own,
Bearing his bastard birth-mark on my face,
I will dispute his title to his throne,
Forever fight him for my rightful place.
There is a searing hate within my soul,
A hate that only kin can feel for kin,
A hate that makes me vigorous and whole,
And spurs me on increasingly to win.
Because I am my cruel father's child,
My love of justice stirs me up to hate,
A warring Ishmaelite, unreconciled,
When falls the hour I shall not hesitate
Into my father's heart to plunge the knife
To gain the utmost freedom that is life.

While a number of words in Hughes's text are "marked" as mulatto (dusk, turpentine, yellow), for McKay, the mulatto mark is a birth-mark owned by the white father, suggesting an irremovable blemish or stain on racial purity, the manifestation of the white man's shame that the mulatto must "bear" for his entire life. At the same time, the physicality and undeniable there-ness of the "birth-mark" testifies against the white father's absurd denial of his son, allowing McKay to bypass the problem of recognition altogether (a bypass also implied in the recognizable sonnet form). Instead of mutual recognition, there is mutually violent rejection: the speaker-son first fantasizes about regicide—"I will dispute his title to his throne" (3)—before turning in the final lines to a more detailed scene of patricide. The "searing hate" (3) that burns in the son's soul also gives him a coherent identity and vitality that makes him "vigorous and whole" (5). The speaker again qualifies this hate that "spurs" by asserting its origin in a "love of justice" (8), suggesting that his acute awareness of the gap between

justice and reality fuels his anger. ?[L]ove of justice? also differentiates the son?s hatred from his father?s, an arbitrary hatred that makes him abandon and oppress his own son.

With the son?s reference to himself as a ?child? in the first line of the final sestet, McKay sets up an oblique revision of the Abraham-Isaac-Ishmael drama that caps off the poem. ?A warring Ishmaelite, unreconciled? invokes not only the Biblical but also the Qu?ranic stories of Ishmael, the illegitimate son of Abraham and his slave, Hagar. In the Biblical version of the story, God establishes his covenant with Abraham?s younger legitimate son, Isaac, and ostracizes Ishmael: ?He shall be a wild man; / His hand shall be against every man, / And every man?s hand against him? (*Genesis* 16:12). Ishmael plays a more positive role in the *Qu?ran*, the holy book of Islam. Indeed, Abraham and Ishmael, father and son, are equally prophets (217), charged with the task of building the Ka?bah at Mecca: ?We enjoined Abraham and Ishmael to cleanse Our House for those who walk round it, who meditate in it, and who kneel and prostrate themselves? (17). If we combine this positive appraisal of Ishmael with the biblical one, then my argument that McKay substitutes Ishmael for Isaac in the final lines becomes plausible. Unlike the passive Isaac, who unknowingly awaits his execution at the hands of his father, the rebellious Ishmaelite son ?shall not hesitate / into [his] father?s heart to plunge the knife? (12-13). It is important to note that the moment of reversed sacrifice is suspended indefinitely: ?*When* falls the hour,? the speaker says. The sonnet does not occur *within* the moment of violence, but rather in the anticipatory resolve or readiness for some future violence.

Obviously, if the solution to injustice that ?The Mulatto? proposes (i.e. patricide) were carried out, such a gesture would be, in the grand scheme of white-dominated capitalism, useless. Given McKay?s involvement with Communism, both in his stint as assistant editor for the leftist journal *The Liberator* and in his grand tour of the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, there must be some other way, some alternative to father-son quarreling or to-the-death knife-fights. One such answer is hinted at in the suspended act and implicit attitude towards futurity of the line ?*When* falls the hour.? While the violence of ?The Mulatto? is direct and uncompromising, such violence is also deferred and thus remains open to the coming future.

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