Humberto Garcia: On "Outcast"

Humberto Garcia Black Colonial Hybridity in McKay?s the "Outcast"

The Negro Problem does not resolve itself into the problem of Negros living among white men but rather of Negros exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonialist, capitalist society that is only accidentally white.

Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

Claude McKay?s short poem, "Outcast," cries out for a postcolonial reading, and yet, the question of colonial identity in relation to race has rarely been fully considered in this poem. Heather A. Hathaway provides a plausible reading of the "Outcast" based on the racial relationship between "White" Euro-American and "black" African culture. Nevertheless, her reading does not consider the central issue in this poem: Colonial structures of domination and the creation of black colonial identity. In Gender, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Culture, Rachel Blau DuPlessis does mention the issue of colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade in connection to the New Negro movement of the 1920s, but she does not draw out the intricate relationship between race, skin color, and colonial subjugation (126-7). This short essay, on the other hand, will propose that Claude McKay?s "Outcast" anticipates Frantz Fanon?s idea that "The Negro Problem" is not only a problem with race and skin color, but a problem rooted in Western colonialism, the exploitation of Africa and the creation of black colonial hybridity. As a result, issues of "postcoloniality" can be traced back to Claude McKay and the Harlem Renaissance before the era of decolonization in the 50s and 60s.

In the "Outcast," the speaker desires the impossible: to return back to a primitive and romanticized, pre-colonial Africa. The speaker?s "spirit" wants to return to the "dim regions" from which his father and ancestors originated, but his body is held in bondage to colonial history and temporality. This mythic and primitive Africa metaphorically signifies a pre-colonial idyllic space of "jungle songs," "darkness," and "peace," but it is also an Africa that signifies the speaker?s lost essence or "spirit." The black "soul," however, can never return to this primitive, pre-colonial past: "the great western world holds me in fee, / And I may never hope for full release / While to its alien gods I bend my knee." The speaker must pay his "fee" like the feudal bondsman who must pay homage and service to his great lord or vassal; this enslaved and oppressed speaker is primarily an embodied identity that must "bend [his] knee" to the values and traditions of his white masters. Black subjugation to white western imperialism is a soulless captivity in which the "body" is inscribed with colonial temporality and history, while the "soul" hopelessly longs for the impossibility of an idyllic, pre-colonial and timeless Africa.

This is why Africa must also metaphorically signify the loss of his identity, which is brought about by the realization that the vitality of a pre-colonial Africa signifies the lack of his soul?s hopeless desire: "Something in me is lost, forever lost, / Some vital thing has gone out of my heart." Due to his corporeal and temporal subjugation to White Western colonialism, "Africa"
fails to metaphorically contain the possibility of liberation, atemporality, and the desire for living within a pre-colonial idyllic space. Thus, by the end of the sonnet, "Africa" metaphorically signifies the lack or negation of the spiritual, vital, and eternal Africa which the speaker intensely desires. As a result, the black soulless "body" must roam the world as an alienated identity or "thing," since it is forever inscribed within a western colonial temporality that it denies: "And I must walk the way of life a ghost / Among the sons of earth, a thing apart." As an identity whose "body" is inscribed with white Western colonialism and whose "soul" forever longs for the impossibility of a past, pre-colonial and eternal Africa, the sonnet makes a powerful statement about black colonial identity as a troubled and alienated hybridity living in two worlds simultaneously without being capable of living in one or the other.

The alienation of Negro colonial identity anticipates Frantz Fanon?s writings about the "double consciousness" of being both a white French citizen and a black colonial subject from Algeria. For Fanon, it is the history of western colonialism that creates a sense of despair, revulsion, and alienation in the Negro intellectual?s understanding of a romanticized, pre-colonial time and his own place within the world of his white masters:

Standing face to face with his country [white western culture] at the present time, and observing clearly and objectively the events of today throughout the continent which he wants to make his own, the intellectual is terrified by the void, degradation, and the savagery he sees there. Now he feels that he must get away from white culture. He must seek his culture elsewhere, anywhere at all; and if he fails to find the substance of culture of the same grandeur and scope as displayed by the ruling power, the native intellectual will very often fall back upon emotional attitudes....This withdrawal, which is due in the first instance to a begging of the question in his internal behavior mechanisms and his own character, brings out, above all, a reflect and contradiction which is muscular. (Decolonizing, National Culture, and the Negro Intellectual 363).

Like in McKay?s the "Outcast," the Africa of Fanon?s desire is an eternal and atemporal space of living possibility that exists outside white western colonialism and history, and yet, it simultaneously signifies the failure and negation of this fantasy and desire. This realization is precisely the moment of withdrawal, alienation, and vexing hybridity for a black colonial subject whose mind, emotions, and spirit desire a return to Africa. However, "black skin" and corporeality will mark this return as historically and temporally impossible. Both Fanon and McKay are capable of understanding their racial inferiority and alienation as inescapably bound to the history of white western colonialism.

However, Fanon contemplates hybridity and alienation in the attempt to positively imagine a politics of nationalism and anti-imperialism, whereas in McKay?s sonnet there is only a deep and troubling sense of despair that offers no political reconciliation: "For I was born, far from my native clime, Under the white man?s menace, out of time." The couplet suggests that the black speaker?s identity is given birth to not in the "native clime" of his father?s Africa, but within the inescapability of Western colonialism and history. However, the phrase "out of time" offers two possible suggestions: It could modify "native clime," in which case the native and primitive Africa of his desire is an atemporal world separate from his colonial identity in western history, and that as a result, the speaker has lost his own place or time in this world. "Out of Time" can also modify "white man?s menace" to signify the idea that white colonialism and history does not really occupy his real temporal position as an African descendant, and
that Western imperialism is a historical moment that has run its course and is now coming to an end. However, this syntactical and verbal ambiguity captures the central issue of the poem: the vexing and troubling ambivalence of black colonial hybridity. The final couplets of McKay’s “Outcast” leaves us with the an irresolvable contradiction at the heart of black colonial identity—a deep despairing psychological tension that marks the impossibility of a coherent activist politics as envisioned by Frantz Fanon, even though the sonnet imagines the possibility of white Western colonialism arriving at a historical finality.

This postcolonial reading of McKay’s “Outcast” focuses on the centrality of colonial positioning in relation to the Negro’s double identity. Like Fanon, Claude McKay’s sonnet allows the reader to see how colonialism makes the desire for a primitive, pre-colonial Africa possible, but also how colonialism, in a sense, negates the fullness of this desire into a lack. The Black colonial subject does not belong in the white western world or in the primitive, mythic Africa, and must therefore roam the world aimlessly in search of a home he will never find and a politics of liberation which turns out to be impossible and contradictory. McKay anticipates Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire’s idea of the displaced colonial subject, even though the “Outcast” does not resonate with their political and national ambitions. Nevertheless, by thinking of McKay’s poem as an exploration of black colonial identity and hybridity, the “Outcast” can relocate the emergence of the “postcolonial” in relation to the New Negro movement of the 1920s, even though the implicit politics of this sonnet might prove problematic for both McKay and his contemporaries.