

Critical Race Theory: Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Other Poems of Resistance as a Manifesto for # Black Lives Matter

Denise Jarrett

Morgan State University, United States of America.

Abstract

In the twenty-first century, messages of liberation for Black people are resounding. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has garnered the task to defend Black lives in pursuit of liberation for Black people to reverse the cycle of oppression through civil and personal engagements. There is no known connection between Claude McKay and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but on close examination, and scoring through the many brilliant writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay's poems of resistance can be read as a modern manifesto for the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The activist dimensions of McKay's poems and the actions of the #BlackLivesMatter movement lend both works and movement to galvanize social changes based on race relationships. In engaging theories such as Critical Race Theory and other postcolonial theories, the writer seeks to present McKay's poems, "The White House," "The Barrier," "Enslaved," "Baptism," "The Lynching," and "If We Must Die," as still relevant in the twenty-first century and as a manifesto, plotting out the stages of resistance that can be a salient direction for the members of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, messages of liberation are resounding as the smell of Black souls brutally murdered in America by whites are rising from the unseen side. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is seeking to reverse the cycle through civil and personal engagements. While there is no known connection, scoring through the many brilliant writers in the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay's poems of resistance can be read as a manifesto for the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Thus, like McKay's resistance poems, #BlackLivesMatter continues to chronicle the active and passive resistance that are employed by Blacks to resist their oppressors as Blacks continue to fight for civil rights in the twenty-first century. A glue that holds these two groups together is Critical Race theory with the assertion of it containing "an activist dimension" and has no interest in understanding "social situation but to change it" (Delgado and Stefancic 8). It also ascertains "how society organize itself along racial lines and hierarchies" only "to transform it for the better" (Delgado and Stefancic 8). The writer seeks to present McKay's poems, "The White House," "The Barrier," "Enslaved," "Baptism," "The Lynching," and "If We Must Die," as still relevant in the twenty-first century and as a manifesto, plotting out the stages of resistance that can be a salient direction for the members of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Claude McKay Poems and Jim Crow America

Claude McKay's message in his poems is forthright when addressing the dehumanization of Blacks in America on the brink of and during the Harlem Renaissance. The messages in his poems are all didactic, particularly teaching Blacks about liberation, empowerment, and most of all rebellion. Heather Hathaway in *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall* posits that McKay allies himself "with his fellow blacks as they explicitly record the

frustration and sorrow, as well as the determination and resilience, with which many African Americans responded to the denial of civil rights” (43). Additionally, Mark Helbling summarizes McKay’s aim as critiquing “the marginalization and exploitation of peoples of black descent” (43). Helbling further explains that marginalization “could also be a consciousness of being as much as a predicament of being. Just as how marginalization served as a ‘site of resistance,’ it also served to ground a racial consciousness free of constraints that others imposed” (105). Hence, still looking at the unconscious, treating creative works like dreams, Sigmund Freud seeks to find subconscious motivations, so one assumes that subconscious motivation to liberate resides in McKay’s poems, his creative works. The socio-historical period, 1912—1920s, in which McKay wrote most of his poems was characterized by blatant racist acts. Certainly, the then “new” race consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance and the general degradation of blacks in Jim Crow society affected McKay’s art. Stephen Bronz highlights the onset of the Harlem Renaissance as “Negro intellectuals in the ‘twenties,’ finding their ethnic group beset by fierce prejudice and plagued by weak group organization, tried to promote interest in Negro historical heroes and Negro literature” (12). McKay’s poems served as a buffer and guide against the cruel lynching and other degrading acts that were meted out to Blacks in his era.

Merging Claude McKay and #BlackLivesMatter

In over one hundred years after the period of McKay’s prominence and the publishing of McKay’s most prominent poem, “If We Must Die (1919),” McKay’s poems still reverberate the same urgency for liberation and justice for Blacks in America, which is now epitomized by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Although the art of poetry is not involved in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the mantra of the movement has repeated the calls that also went

out to Blacks during the Harlem Renaissance through McKay's poems. In the twenty first century, technology has made the prominence of acts of cruelty against Blacks far more revealing. Wesley Lowery in his memoir states that "Ferguson would birth the movement and set the nation on a course for a still on-going public hearing on race that stretched far pass the killing of unarmed residents—from daily policing to Confederate imagery to respectable politics to cultural appropriation" (4). Lowery further explains that the death of an unarmed Black man, Michael Brown, shot by a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri, initiated the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The social justice movement spawned with Mike Brown's blood would force city by city to grapple with its own fraught histories with race and policing. As protests propelled by tweets and hashtags spread under the banner of Black Lives Matter and with cell phone and body camera shining new light on the way police interact with minority communities, America was forced to consider that not everyone marching in the streets could be wrong. (4)

#BlackLivesMatter echoes McKay's thoughts of Black liberation because the climate in the Harlem Renaissance, a little into the first third of the twentieth century, is similar to the social and political climate in America in the twenty-first century which has intensified in the 2020 and beyond Covid-19 pandemic. Christopher J. Lebron believes that "#BlackLivesMatter represents an ideal that motivates, mobilizes, and informs the actions and progress of many branches of the moment #BlackLivesMatter is akin to a social movement brand that can be picked up by any interested group of activists inclined to speak out and act against racial injustice" (xii). Further, Lebron argues that "no such text exists to provide the philosophical moorings of #BlackLivesMatter" (xiii), but for him "'Black Lives Matter' represents a civic

desire for equality and a human desire for respect, the intellectual roots of which lies deep into the history of black American thought” (xiii). Giving a chronology from slavery to the twenty-first century, Lebron shows the plight of the Black body during slavery to the Jim Crow era, specifically the Harlem Renaissance. He mentions Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells political stance during reconstruction, and Langston Hughes and Zora Neil Hurston’s literary works as trendsetters for the #BlackLivesMatter movement during the Harlem Renaissance (Lebron xi-xii). However, McKay’s poems of resistance should have given him the title as the best fit as a precursor to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The Modern Manifesto, McKay’s Resistance Poems, and #BlackLivesMatter

When one hears the word manifesto, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) comes to mind as a text that is still viewed today as a didactic revolutionary tool. However, in modernizing the manifesto, writer, Janet Lyon, has redefined this ideology in *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Lyon has created several ideologies about the manifesto as a genre that have dated the original stance. First, she removes “taxonomies and modalities” (12), which allow for a wider range of works to be classified in the genre. Next, she allows it to have wider “valences on culture” (12), breaking cultural boundaries. The modern manifesto stands for “the testimony of a historical present tense spoken in the impassioned voice of its participant” and “insistently unmediated, that it appears to say only what it means, and to mean only what it says” (9). Thus, “it declares a position,” “refuses dialogue or discussion,” and “fosters antagonism and scorns conciliation” (9). Lyon also warns that a manifesto drives “oppositionality” and is not for the “fainthearted” (9). The modern manifesto, then, is a means of plotting the struggle against oppositional forces. Claude McKay’s resistance poems fit into the genre of modern manifesto, which can serve as a guide to

the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Creeds 1-3: Restrain, Ruthlessness, and Deception and #BlackLivesMatter Navigating the Dangerous Racist Terrain McKay conveys oppression in “The White House,” “The Barrier,” and “Enslaved” where often, the speakers angrily reject the treatment of blacks by whites and call for Blacks to be strong and wise as they navigate the dangerous racist terrain, America. Occasionally, McKay allows Blacks to mask their feelings and to show restraint. McKay seems passive, at times, because “The White House” suggests the first creed—the need for blacks to demonstrate discipline, stoicism, and dignity in the face of oppression: “Your door is shut against my tightened face,/And I am sharp as steel with discontent;/ But I possess the courage and the grace/To bear my anger proudly and unbent” (McKay, *Harlem* 78). The narrator’s humanity causes him to bear his “anger proudly and unbent,” so he remains “decent” even though he bears the rage of a “chafing savage,” and even though “passion” tears at his heart to rebel when he passes the white man’s “door of glass.” He has to use “wisdom” and “superhuman” strength to uphold “the letter “of the white man’s “law” (McKay, *Harlem* 78). It is only at this point that the narrator specifically names “white man” as the source of his anger. McKay, in fact, uses his narrator didactically to teach the lesson of self-discipline. For #BlackLivesMatter to be respected in America, it must be a disciplined force. Thus, McKay’s first message for the movement would be to practice restrain.

“The White House” rightly warns about the pejorative stereotype persisting from slavery, the angry Black man (Buck) that keeps him from showing restraint. Critical Race theorists show their renunciation of this stereotype. Furthermore, Critical Race theory allows a paradigm, according to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, that produces acumens into the racial predicament in the twenty first century, revealing how racial stratification is extremely powerful and has endured throughout centuries. Hence, mainstream America might label the creative

hashtag line, #BlackLivesMatter, as a cry from the angry Black man, but it is not. #BlackLivesMatter was circulated via social media that has spun a movement of millions of people, particularly people from the post-Joshua generation otherwise called millennials. Some other catchy poetic refrain from the movement are “Hands up, don’t shoot” words that were uttered by a Black man Michael Brown who was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, and “I can’t breathe,” words from another Black victim, Eric Garner, who was shot in New York. These cries from the #BlackLivesMatter movement do not project anger but restraint.

Hence, the #BlackLivesMatter movement started out as a peaceful movement aligning with McKay’s call for masking and obviously, a safer reaction then and even now, which is in tune with fellow Black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar who outlines how and when Blacks should “wear the mask” and the painful but safer results in masking. Lowery quotes Bree Newsome—one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter, who clarifies that in 2012, there was a consensus to specify what a “coalition based, intersectional activism around the unique systemic threat to black bodies could look like” (4). It was then made clear that she meant a peaceful response since [s]he’d studied the history of nonviolence, disobedience, read the writings of Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., and knew the value of disruptive protests” (Lowery 4). Unfortunately, some Blacks today have worn the mask too long until it has molded into their personalities and has now become their identity. Lowery, however, states that holding back one’s disdain for the treatment of Blacks in America is disappearing because while others would have questioned Mike Brown’s choices—he was accused of stealing and being aggressive—that led to his death. Lowery poses the question; “did Eric Garner, Johns Crawford, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland all deserve to die?” (Lowery 4). Since 2009 to 2018, coinciding with the election of President Obama and leading to the election of President Trump,

the killing of Black people has been escalating. Thus, Lowery concludes that there is no such state as a post racial America (4).

In McKay's "The Barrier," the speaker seems to be more aware of the racial tension because in describing the attributes of a white person, he warns that the latter's physical appearance can be deceptive, which the #BlackLivesMatter movement has also learned. Hence, paradoxical images of attraction and repulsion occur throughout the poem, to warn Blacks of the restraints that have been placed on them by whites. The white person's "eyes are dawning day"; the voice is "fluting like a river reed"; and the face is "[l]ove's softly glowing spark" (McKay, *Harlem* 9), but blacks are warned not to be beguiled by these attributes: "I must not gaze at them," "I hear but I must never heed," and "I must not see upon your face" ((McKay, *Harlem* 9). Facing reality, precautionary reasoning burst forth, "[f]or there's the barrier of race,/You're fair and I am dark" (McKay, *Harlem* 9). The narrator goes more deeply into the race problem suggesting that even if there is "[l]ove's softly glowing spark" (McKay, *Harlem* 9) on the white person's face, this "spark" must not be taken as an invitation.

Many have addressed the racial barrier, but W.E.B. Dubois addresses this problem in his famous book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In *The Souls*, DuBois explains that a Black person's skin color places him or her at a disadvantage in the American society. DuBois simply wishes that it would be made "possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (9). Like McKay, Dubois identifies the problem in America as racist, stating explicitly that "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (DuBois xv). #BlackLivesMatter movement has confronted the "color-line" that DuBois

addressed in the twentieth century as affecting the lives of Blacks throughout America in the twenty first century.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, #BlackLiveMatter has surged as the devastating picture of a white police officer kneels on the neck of a Black male, George Floyd, which led to his death voicing disgust over the myriads of white on Black killings which are made prominent through social media. Scores of people protested Floyd's murder along with other such injustices; however, in the heights of these protests, white nationalist groups infiltrated seemingly supporting the cause, but instead, they had different agendas. McKay explains that irrespective of whites who appears to be supportive of Blacks, "there's the barrier of race" (Harlem 9). White racists far-leftists groups such as the boogaloo boys and the antifa movement infiltrated these protests acting as supporters but with their own racist agendas.

McKay's poems become didactic as they cause Blacks to be aware that white America devalues, disrespects, and destroys Black lives, and if Black America lets down its guard, it will be deceived. #BlackLivesMatter has also taken on this mantle to teach this awareness. Critical Race Theory suggests that the "disproportionate criminalization of African Americans is a product" of the way crime is defined in America (Delgado and Stefancic 120). Many African Americans are imprisoned even if they commit a crime that is less severe than their white counterpart. For instance, Michael Brown was killed for selling cigarettes without a license; yet, whites who own large tobacco companies are not prosecuted for distributing these toxic and even lethal substances to millions of people.

It is unfortunate that high Black incarceration rates play out in the political arena in the American society where many Blacks are forced to let down their guards. In Michelle Alexander's *Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, she highlights that

slavery was the initial tool to separate poor whites from Blacks legally. She forms her thesis around the idea that the ramifications of slavery, the Jim Crow system, and the current mass incarceration of Blacks are to perpetuate the separation of races as a means of social control. It is within this frame that many Blacks are convicted of crimes that they did not commit because many of them have to rely on public defenders, who are mostly white, in their crisis. Hence, Blacks are unable to get proper help to fight their accusers because of lack of finances, so they are usually incarcerated even when they are not guilty, while their white accusers, in most cases, are more likely to get the best in the legal system to represent them. Paul Butler in his article “US Justice Is Built to Humiliate and Oppress Black Men. And It Starts with the Chokehold” explains that “Police violence and selective enforcement are not so much flaws in American criminal justice as they are integral features of it. The chokehold is why; legally speaking, black lives don’t matter as much as white lives.”

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has become fully aware of the political system that has encouraged racism because of the fear of the Black man that can be viewed through postcolonialist Homi Bhabha’s “functional overdetermination,” which causes contradictions because of the disavowal of heterogeneous components (106). Because the Black man is analogous to the white man, and considering that the only difference is pigmentation, there should be no difference between how they are treated in similar situations. To nullify the unjust treatments of Blacks, the #BlackLivesMatter movement must be constantly engaged in fighting the disparity between Blacks and whites in a system that is entrenched in the economic, psychological, social, and political spheres which suffer from “overdetermination.” The hope for a post racial society is further collapsing since it did not reform itself during and certainly not post America’s first Black President, Barak Obama’s, leadership; instead, it has led to

colorblind racism. Critical race theory realizes why colorblindness is projected as racist even when it is presented as a stance against overdetermination and has suggested that America is post racial. Whites, who believe that Blacks have progressed greatly, exaggerate the civil rights achievements as take the colorblind attitude. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva labels this ideology as colorblind racism, which is “a new powerful racial ideology... that combines elements of liberalism with culturally-based antiminority views to justify the contemporary racial order” (275).

The poem “Enslaved” examines the lives of Blacks from a different point of view, since rather than underscoring the apparently deceptive nature of whites, it explores the notion of their ruthlessness. This ruthlessness has become the dagger that ironically breathes life into the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The movement often recounts the history of the Black race in America much like the narrator in “Enslaved” who renounces the treatment of his “long-suffering race.” The poem touches upon the enslavement and shipment of blacks from Africa (“the Black Land disinherited”) to America (“the Christian West”) and then to the current state of the people:

For weary centuries despised, oppressed,
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the Black Land disinherited,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth. (McKay, *Harlem* 26)

The narrator’s “heart grows sick with hate” (McKay, *Harlem* 26) when he recalls how whites have treated his people. McKay, of course, would have been aware of his fellow Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, whose philosophy holds dearly that “[a] people without the knowledge of their

past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots" (Garvey 447). The Black past is aggravating, so the narrator allows emotive feelings such as anger to emerge. Hall explains that "tension is experienced as pain or discomfort (22). The speaker has become so angry that he reverts to the id and calls for revenge: "from the dark depths of my soul [he cries/To the avenging angel to consume/The white man's world of wonders utterly:/Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,/Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke/To liberate my people from its yoke!" (McKay, *Harlem* 26). Thus, his people will be delivered from their "yoke" through this sacrifice. These images perhaps explain why David Littlejohn, though disagreeing with some aspects of McKay's poetry, finds "[McKay's] strength is in his anger, in the fury of his rhythms and images and diction" (57). It is this anger that Blacks have been quelling from the dying of the Civil Rights era that deemed them passive but then gave way in 2014 when many Blacks started again to line the streets protesting and rioting even through beatings and imprisonment supporting the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Creeds 4-6: Black Unity, Pride, Overt Rebellion, and #BlackLivesMatter

"The Lynching," "Baptism," and "If We Must Die," convey more aggression towards racism and are more concerned with Black unity, pride, and active rebellion. Cooper states, "McKay recognized that the need for racial pride, greater self-sufficiency, and group unity could not be supplied by white radicals no matter how great their sympathy and understanding of the race problem" (47). Additionally, in becoming radical, it can be argued that Freud's death instinct is affecting McKay's expressions in these poems. Freud's "death instinct, for example, is projected outward by the ego in the form of destruction, aggression, mastery, dominance, exploitations, and competition" (Hall 100). And, as Frantz Fanon believes, there comes a time

when the spirit of open rebellion rises, especially in the oppressed, and only death can quench this active desire. Thus, Fanon explains that:

The naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence.

(37)

“The Lynching” describes the act of lynching and the reactions of whites. The sonnet’s octave describes the black man’s fate:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.

His father, by the cruelest way of pain,

Had bidden him to his bosom once again;

The awful sin remained still unforgiven.

All night a bright and solitary star

(Perchance the one that ever guided him,

Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)

Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char. (McKay, *Harlem* 43)

The speaker explains that the black male was lynched in the most barbaric way because his body has now become a “swinging char.” Nevertheless, the narrator gives the black man hope by allowing the latter’s “spirit in smoke” to ascend to “high heaven” (McKay, *Harlem* 43). Yet, there is an injustice which is unaddressed, since “[t]he awful sin remained still unforgiven”

(McKay, *Harlem* 43). McKay's descriptions of the dead souls ascending aptly mirror the recent murder of Blacks by white police officers and white supremacists such as James Harris Jackson who ran his 18-inch sword through a 66 years old black man in New York as the *Times* reports, "to get a rush" (Piccoli). This act and the brutal shootings by guns are the new acts of lynching. The strange fruits that Billie Holiday sings about hanging on the poplar trees are reminiscent to what McKay describes, but in the twenty first century "fruits" are left to rot on the ground after vicious stabbings and shooting of Blacks. Butler informs that:

[t]here has never, not for one minute in American history, been peace between black people and the police. And nothing since slavery – not Jim Crow segregation, not lynching, not restrictive covenants in housing, not being shut out of New Deal programs like social security and the GI bill, not massive white resistance to school desegregation, not the ceaseless efforts to prevent blacks from voting – nothing has sparked the level of outrage among African Americans as when they have felt under violent attack by the police.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement is an example of activism as a result of the "outrage among African Americans" because of police brutality to Blacks.

McKay's "The Lynching" highlights the reactions of whites towards Blacks who are brutalized, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement is just as critical of white responses to Blacks' demise. In the sonnet's sextet, the speaker continues to describe the "ghastly body" to expose the savagery of the act. Yet, the speaker's major concern is to examine the reactions of whites especially women and children. "The women thronged to look" (McKay, *Harlem* 43), yet "never a one/ Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue" (McKay, *Harlem* 43). To show how whites accept this act as normal, he also explains that the "little lads, lynchers that were to

be,/Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee” (McKay, *Harlem* 43). Because the children themselves are trained to accept this act as normal, they do not feel pity or remorse. Today, the tradition that Blacks’ lives and bodies do not matter to whites are not passed on to the next white generation through the lynching picnic that McKay describes or by demonstrating as seen in the arousal of the engraver's young son watching Sethe being sexually ravished by his father in Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison 5), but by the media, where when the white police and white supremacists “lynchers” are pictured as being triumphant.

“Baptism” and “If We Must Die” teach blacks resilience towards oppression, leading to a call for active overt rebellion much like the #BlackLivesMatter movement’s call. According to the article “Black Lives Matter: A New Movement Takes Shape” by Khury Petersen-Smith,

one of the movement’s most popular refrains in street protests and social media is “shut it down!” Beyond a rhetorical slogan, this has found expression in the real world as activists in dozens of cities have marched onto highways to disrupt traffic; linked arms across railroad tracks to stop trains; sat down in urban intersections; delayed sporting events; and temporarily occupied shopping malls, major retail stores, police departments, and city halls. (96)

For these revolts to be successful, there is a strong call for unity among Blacks. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor outlines the economic and social divisions among Blacks in the United States. She discusses how Black elites are used as measurements to prove that lower class Blacks have not done enough to uplift self (6-8). The #BlackLivesMatter has subverted this separatist ideology and have called all Blacks, irrespective of class, education, sexual orientation, and/or political affiliation to become united by joining the movement. Even President Barrack Obama was ostracized by the movement for

being passive because he did not highlight the antagonistic race relations between Blacks and whites in America in his speech after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, U. S.A. (Petersen-Smith). Likewise, McKay's poems relay the notion of unity, calling for Blacks to act on one accord to defend their own cause. He also promotes a certain form of radicalism that will allow Blacks to be stronger as they suffer and even when they are facing death. Bronz agrees that McKay preaches resilience: "Whatever the white world does to me, he seems to be saying, it cannot crush my own strong individual spirit" (73).

While the #BlackLivesMatter movement calls for unity, it also calls for Blacks to self-evaluate and make individual decisions before becoming a part of the movement and to build resilience even in individual experiences where each Black person in America has to renew self when faced with adversaries which shows bravery. "Baptism" shows the power of a non-destructive fire that helps one to become more resilient. The narrator speaks of being hardened by an experience in a furnace, a metaphor for the hardship that Blacks face. In this instance, the narrator seems to describe an individual, rather than a group experience, since there is a proclamation stating, "[i]nto the furnace let me go alone" (McKay, *Harlem* 44). While willing to proceed alone, others who are timid are asked to "stay...without in terror of the heat" (McKay, *Harlem* 44). The persona is determined to become hardened by his solitary journey:

I will go naked in--for thus 'tis sweet—
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
You will not note a flicker of defeat;
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
My mouth give utterance to any moan. (McKay, *Harlem* 44)

The experience in the fire will prove the persona's bravery, long suffering, and fearlessness because he will neither "quiver," "flicker," nor "tremble." The narrator echoes the similar Christian belief that baptism promotes a rebirth, since the ordeal in the fire will create a person with new strength. There is also the Freudian paradox, in which pain is sometimes experienced as pleasure, since "the temporary endurance of 'pain' on the long circuitous road" leads to pleasure" (Freud, *Beyond* 5). Thus, the narrator is comfortable with the masochistic act whereby gratification is gained from pain (Freud, *Beyond* 67-70) even if the pain felt is from a malevolent source. In the narrator's description of the furnace's flame that "destroys, consumes [his] mortal fears," transforming him "into a shape of flame" (McKay, *Harlem* 44) that strengthens his "soul" and gives him a stronger, a "finer frame" (McKay, *Harlem* 44). Blacks, then, have gained strength over the years to conquer all, so it is not surprising that Blacks are rising up, and it seems as if Black America is on the cusp of a racial war.

"If We Must Die," one of McKay's most referred poems, is often labeled a protest, radical, revolutionary, or racist. In an article that McKay wrote to the *New York Harold-Tribute Books*, he explains that "[t]he poem was an outgrowth of intense emotional experience [he] was living through (no doubt with thousands of other Negroes) in those days" (Cooper, *The Passion* 132). "If We Must Die" is a cry for blacks collectively to fight for their freedom in a glorious manner. To show the viciousness of the executer, the narrator employs animal imagery. The poem opens, "If we must die, let it not be like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot" (McKay, *Harlem* 45). The speaker begs

his race to be bold in dying, and “not be like hogs.” He depicts whites as “mad and hungry dogs” who, “barking,” have surrounded Blacks. This barking mocks Blacks, defining them as the “accused lot” (McKay, *Harlem* 45). The narrator’s real message to Blacks is seen in the next four lines of the sonnet:

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, *Harlem* 45).

The speaker calls for the uplifting of his people, even if this elevation occurs after death, since whites will be forced to “honor” his race after they win the battle. He asks his people to die “nobly” without having to shed their “precious blood” in vain. He identifies the whites as “the monsters” who are presently challenging Blacks’ right to power, progress, and dignity. #BlackLivesMatter has also identified whites as the “monster” that has been “shedding Blacks’ blood in vain. Thus, the movement’s message has become as militant as McKay’s because #BlackLivesMatter are calling on Blacks in America to fight back honorably and not in vain.

Petersen-Smith explains that “[g]oing forward, the movement faces opportunities and new challenges. While the resistance has inspired a new radicalization, it has also polarized society. Racist forces are beginning their own mobilization in response to the protests,” which suggests that Blacks will continually be in battle. It is at this juncture that McKay’s words in “If We Must Die” direct the #BlackLivesMatter movement’s

future responses to warring cries. The poem's sestet instructs blacks about what is expected of them in the battle. The speaker perceives realistically that the "common foe" will win the battle if his people are not united. Indeed, there is strength in unity since his race is "far outnumbered." He hopes that Blacks will "deal one death-blow" even though the enemies will be giving them a "thousand blows." The narrator concedes that the "open grave" will be before them. The only choice is, facing the unmanly "cowardly pack" with dignity. The speaker ends by stating that Blacks might be "[p]ressed to the wall" and "dying" but that they will be "fighting back!" (McKay, *Harlem* 45)

Echoes of McKay's Call in the Late 20th and Early 21st Century

McKay's call has been echoed repeatedly by many other male and female poets, civil rights leaders, and even rappers and reggae artists have patterned this call for revolution. Martin Luther King Jr. echoes this cry saying, "I am not sad that African Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable . . . Black man has slammed the door shut on a past of deadening passivity" (qtd. in Taylor 1). This is the call of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which is described by Petersen-Smith as "already the single most sustained period of antiracist protest in decades; it has pierced a big hole in the ideology of a post-racial America and exposed the deep and persistent patterns of racism in the United States." Winning the equality battle will result in national racial pride, since Blacks would have exercised their free will to combat and stamp out oppression.

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