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Staging the Stigma: Syphilis and Its Metaphors  
in Claude McKay's *The Clinic*

Abstract

The paper proposes a reading of Claude McKay's *The Clinic* (circa 1923) as a text addressing the male diseased body and the clinic as symbolic sites of stigma. More specifically, the male (homo)sexualized body at the center of McKay's poetic investigation is scrutinized according to two crucial axes of dis-identification: sexuality and ethnicity. Drawing on the Foucauldian genesis of the clinic as a space of signification of illness and of the body, I contend that McKay stages the shift from medical to poetic gaze and scrutinizes the diseased body as a site of stigma and shame to disavow, in order to advocate a new, idealized model of black subjectivity.

*quare animum quoque dissolui fateare necessest,  
quandoquidem penetrant in eum contagia morbi  
(Lucretius, De Rerum Natura)\**

In the whole corpus of Claude McKay's poems, *The Clinic* has been almost completely overlooked by scholars, who have mainly focused their attention on his first two juvenile collections (*Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*) and especially on *Harlem Shadows*, published in 1922. Written after the author was hospitalized in Paris for syphilis, *The Clinic* is a collection of ten poems, composed between 1923 and 1927, in which McKay's account of both the hospital and the syphilis treatment sheds light on his personal and artistic identity, while posing questions about his closeted homosexuality, his controversial attitude toward sex and the sexed (or sexualized) body, and his relationship

with modernist poetry<sup>1</sup>. By dealing with syphilis and describing the medical environment as they have been experienced by the poet, *The Clinic* also touches upon the thorny issues of illness as a symbolic site of stigma, and poetic gaze as the substitute for medical gaze, in that both equally scrutinize the diseased body in order to retrieve its hidden truth and concealed identity.

In this article I will try to address some of the inquiries that Sarah Dowling raises in her study about the “queer” clinic and modernist poetry: «How might poetry ... reverse the medical conceptions of body, health and wellness? How might poetry make histories of inversion or other historical conceptions of homosexuality newly relevant ... ?»<sup>2</sup> With regard to McKay, these questions sounds all the more problematic because of his reticent attitude about sexuality in general and, especially, about his own homo- or bisexuality. When directly dealing with sex and sexuality, in fact, McKay «cultivated an air of ambiguity»<sup>3</sup>, preferring to gloss over the issue of sexual identity as irrelevant to his joyful and unproblematic approach to sex. He maintains: «I am entirely unobsessed by sex», and then argues: «sex was never much of a problem to me. I played at sex as a child in a

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\* «Wherefore you must confess that the mind also / Is dissolved, since the contagion of disease / Penetrates into it» (Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, Book III 470-472, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 83).

<sup>1</sup> McKay is not alone in establishing this connections since, as Sarah Dowling remarks, a number of modernist poets dealt with medical issues and with the clinic, «and many more were deeply engaged with sexological sciences» (Sarah Dowling, *Foreword—As Per Verse: The Queer in the Clinic in the Poem*, in “Journal of Medical Humanities”, 34, 2, 2013, pp. 269-270).

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, p. 270.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay Tuggle, “A love so fugitive and so complete”: *Recovering the Queer Subtext of Claude McKay’s Harlem Shadows*, in “The Space Between”, IV, 1, 2008, p. 65.

healthily [sic] harmless way. ... I never made a problem of sex. ... my main psychological problem ... was the problem of color»<sup>4</sup>.

Probably also because of this, McKay's scholars have long ignored or paid little attention to sexuality in his work, as Gary E. Holcomb points out<sup>5</sup>, and only recently have started focusing on sexuality and homosexuality as an essential component of his literary production, to be investigated along with the well-known topics that have earned him popularity, such as ethnicity, class-conflict, postcoloniality, and exoticism<sup>6</sup>.

Homosexuality is one of the central themes of *The Clinic*, and, as in other poems<sup>7</sup>, it is never explicitly addressed as such, but merely hinted at through more or less detectable and disguised references. Both Holcomb and Tuggle, by noticing how in McKay's works silences are often more explicit and telling than words, hypothesize that any

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<sup>4</sup> Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 2007 (or. ed. 1937), pp. 176 and 189.

<sup>5</sup> He notices that «[i]n spite of the critical advances made in queer studies, inquiries into McKay's literary expression of sexuality as well as his representation of difference have generated a limited critical discourse» (Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha. Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2007, p. 12).

<sup>6</sup> The postcolonial approach has focused on McKay's Jamaican descent and education, while exoticism and primitivism have been addressed insofar as McKay, despite his prolonged stay in Paris like many of the so-called "lost generation" American artists, did not like the city (Claude McKay, *A Long Way* cit., p. 177), envisaging in Spain and in Morocco his personal, primitive and rebellious, response to the sophisticated and eminently white Paris the other American expatriates enjoyed at the time, as he explicitly remarks in his autobiography: «It was interesting in Paris to mix in among the cosmopolitan expatriates. The milieu was sympathetic. It was broader than the radical milieu of Greenwich Village. ... Frankly to say, I never considered myself identical with the white expatriates. ... The majority of them were sympathetic toward me. But their problems were not exactly my problems. They were all-white with problems in white which were rather different from problems in black» (*Ivi*, p. 187). On the different theoretical approaches to McKay's work developed so far see, among others, Gary E. Holcomb, Marlon B. Ross and Lindsay Tuggle.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Lindsay Tuggle's essay on *Harlem Shadows*.

reading of his poems must take into consideration the “speech acts of silence” related to homosexuality, in order to thoroughly make sense of his poetry. The former maintains that «[l]istening to the various “speech acts of silence,” ... in McKay’s autobiographical performance enables a reading that offers ingress into McKay’s textual closet»<sup>8</sup>, whereas, according to the latter’s words, in McKay’s poetry the «correlation between the act of sex and being rendered mute involves the rhetorical construction of ... the “speech act of silence:” an interrogation of the inability to speak ... about certain acts»<sup>9</sup>.

However, as I will try to demonstrate with my reading of *The Clinic*, McKay’s complex intertwining of silence and voice, of medical and poetical discourse, while surely hinting at subversive forms of sexual behavior, also foregrounds a problematic idealization of disembodied subjectivity. As Marlon B. Ross effectively remarks, McKay «carefully desexes his own narrative of liberation»<sup>10</sup>.

*The Clinic* is structured as a collection of poems that can be grouped into two main sections. The first one (comprising four poems) focuses on an anonymous male protagonist, or rather (and significantly) on his body, which is minutely described and scrutinized. The man, whose identity is never revealed, is hospitalized after having been likely diagnosed with syphilis, and, following a presumably long and grievous medical treatment, eventually dies. The fifth poem, *The Retreat*, simultaneously separates and bridges the first and the second

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<sup>8</sup> Gary E. Holcomb, *Diaspora Cruises* cit., p. 716.

<sup>9</sup> Lindsay Tuggle, “*A love so fugitive*” cit., p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race. Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*, New York University Press, New York, 2004, p. 269. Tuggle praises McKay’s reticence by maintaining that «because of his encoded sexual subterfuge, his deliberate inclusion of homoerotic themes constitutes a barely closeted form of poetic protest» (Tuggle, “*A love so fugitive*” cit., p. 66), while Holcomb more explicitly points out that «[l]istening to the various “speech acts of silence”... enables a reading that offers ingress into McKay’s textual closet» (*Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay’s A Long Way from Home*, in “MFS Modern Fiction Studies”, 49, 4, 2003, p. 716).

part, the latter being focused on the experiences of the poetic self. A slant reference to the hospitalization of the poet himself, it suggests how his poetic persona is taking the chance of the quiet retreat where he is confined to isolate himself from the outer world and enjoy his solitary stay. The mention of the «foreign tongue that soothes and charms», to which the poet is «gently exposed» (202)<sup>11</sup>, is a plausible reference to Paris, where McKay was actually hospitalized, the poem thus confirming its autobiographical character. The remainder of the text (poems from six through ten) comprises the poet's (or better his poetic ego's) ruminations about death and, more generally, about the uneasiness and discomfort of experiencing modernity and its discontents. Less graphic and more melancholic, one of the poems comprised in this section (*For Marguerite*) also praises a presumably lost "golden era" of happiness and peacefulness, symbolically cast in the remote Caribbean of McKay's childhood. Though the very short last poem (*Convalescing*) reveals that the poet himself is affected by «vile illness in [his] blood» (207), the impression that any reader gets from the whole collection is that his general attitude towards syphilis and, especially, the patient featured in the first part, remains detached and ostensibly objectifying of bodies and selves. Syphilis, in the poem, is the extreme, but unavoidable, consequence of a sexually immoral and promiscuous lifestyle.

A major complication in the analysis and interpretation of *The Clinic*, as can be easily surmised from the above overview, derives from the role and prominence of autobiographical matter in the overall narrative and ideological economy of the text, which blurs the lines separating the author as a biographical entity from the poetic voice embodied in the verses. As Holcomb maintains, in fact, «the hospital

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<sup>11</sup> Quotes from *The Clinic* will be indicated parenthetically with the page number. The edition used for this article is Claude McKay, *Complete Poems*, edited and with an Introduction by William J. Maxwell, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2004.

and illness constitute a fusion of the metaphorical and the existential that orders [McKay's] oeuvre»<sup>12</sup>. Autobiographic details, moreover, are significant insofar as they shed light on the problematic relationship between McKay and homosexuality, a sort of hidden leitmotiv of the whole poem. My aim, however, is not that of tracing a tentative correspondence between *The Clinic* and specific episodes in McKay's private life, nor that of using *The Clinic* as further evidence of McKay's ambiguities in dealing with (his own) homosexuality. On the contrary, I will just move from autobiographic evidence to hypothesize that McKay's attitude towards illness responds to a precise, individual and political need: that is, *The Clinic*, together with a number of McKay's other works, is part of his overarching project to construct an idealized model of black subjectivity in which both (homo)sexuality and corporeality have to be somehow transcended. McKay's new paradigm of black subjecthood breaks away from any obsession with sensual pleasures, openly despised as the visible legacy of decadent and bourgeois ideology, or, worse, as the most despicable of the stereotypes commonly mobilized against black people<sup>13</sup>.

In *The Clinic*, illness is thus meant to function as a powerful metaphor, besides being described as an actual condition: it serves, in fact, McKay's need to subsume and symbolize a model of social and sexual behavior that he reposes unfit for the "reformed negro" he fantasizes about. The stigma of syphilis operates, in the poem, both as a warning and as an exemplary punishment for those who might want to indulge in old and decadent habits. As Nicholas Jabbour summarizes,

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<sup>12</sup> Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay* cit., p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> McKay was almost obsessed with the need to debunk the sexual stereotypes attached to black people, at the cost of denying or dismissing his own sexual identity. In his autobiography he writes: «My experience of the English convinced me that prejudice against Negroes had become almost congenital among them. I think the Anglo-Saxon mind becomes morbid when it turns on the sex life of colored people. Perhaps a psychologist might be able to explain why» (Claude McKay, *A Long Way* cit., p. 63).

in fact, syphilis was highly tabooed in the American society of the first decades of the twentieth century. People diagnosed with syphilis were, in most cases, condemned to a closeted life, because of the strong moral implications of the disease and because of the impossibility to even openly name it, given the stigma accompanying people suffering from it and the ethical implications of the diagnosis<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, *The Clinic*'s poetic rhetoric stages, in the first four poems, the man suffering from syphilis as the embodiment of that abjection frequently identified with a whole ethnic group, which McKay clearly wants to disavow and distance himself from. As James H. Jones remarks in *Bad Blood* (a study of the infamous experiment carried out in Tuskegee, Alabama, from the 1930s, by inoculating syphilis into African-American men), physicians used to consider syphilis as intrinsically bound up with black men, both because of the myth of black people's sexually ungovernable behavior, and because of the neglect of any personal and community hygiene that presumably characterized the black population. Syphilis was depicted as «the quintessential black disease», African-American were considered, for these reasons, «a notoriously syphilis-soaked race»<sup>15</sup>.

The autobiographical perspective emerging from the second part of *The Clinic* is thus paramount to any analysis of the poem, since it instances McKay's efforts to build up a new paradigm of black masculine subjecthood, finally free from the stereotypes usually associated to black men (laziness, lack of interest in political and social issues, obsession with sensual pleasures and with sex, and so on). However, McKay had to face a personal, troublesome source of conflict: his own homosexuality, in fact, represented for him a major

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Jabbour, *Syphilis from 1880 to 1920: A Public Health Nightmare and the First Challenge to Medical Ethics*, in "Essays in History", 42, 2000.

<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/com/swift/HPR319UDD/Syphilis.html>

<sup>15</sup> James H. Jones, *Bad Blood. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*, The Free Press, London, 1981, pp. 24 and 29.

hindrance to the shaping of a new model of male subjectivity that was to be free from excessive sensuality. While he was eager to explode the myths and stereotypes attached to male blackness, an analogous attempt with regard to the social stigmatization of homosexuality seems to be placed out of his reach. As pointed out above, homosexuality represented for McKay a way more controversial issue than blackness, to the point that he never explicitly identified himself as a homosexual man, and was always elusive and vague when referring to his sexual orientation; on the contrary, as Marlon B. Ross effectively summarizes, he «went to great lengths to protect his “stamp of virility”, even as he took forays into ... the complex of sexual deviance expressed in his novels as sexually transmitted disease, extramarital bonding, sweet-backing, female prostitution, sadomasochism, and same-sexuality»<sup>16</sup>.

The genesis of *The Clinic* confirms this reticence: it is unquestionable, in fact, that McKay wrote the poems drawing on his personal experience as a patient hospitalized in Paris for syphilis<sup>17</sup>; however, he never admitted to having contracted the disease through sexual activity, blaming it on the dirty linens he found in Soviet Union, where he sojourned before going back to Paris:

My first accident of illness occurred in Russia. Sanitary conditions were not ideal in Petrograd and Moscow in 1922. ... I remember that every time I received my linen from the laundry I invariably found lice in it. The linen itself was very clean. But the revolution, sweeping away the privileged classes, also had carried along most of their servants. And of the peasants fresh from the country who replaced them, many were neither competent nor clean<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race* cit., p. 269.

<sup>17</sup> Information about this occurrence in McKay's life can be retrieved from his biographies; see for instance what William J. Maxwell writes in the Notes about *The Clinic* (*Notes to the Poems*, in Claude McKay, *Complete Poems* cit., p. 338), or Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay* cit., p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Claude McKay, *A Long Way* cit., p. 177.



This piece of autobiographical information can be precious to make sense of the peculiar structure of *The Clinic* as a twofold narrative of the same disease, one ending in death and the other one ending in convalescence. McKay thus produces a split between his public persona and his real self. He objectifies (or even reifies) the protagonist of the first part of the poem by resorting to the allegedly objectivity and neutrality of the medical gaze. This marks a sharp distinction between the “actual” McKay, a closeted gay man who contracted syphilis by sexual intercourse with (presumably) other men, and whose identity he wanted to keep hidden and to disavow; and the “public” McKay, the poet of the new black proletarian hero, who disdainfully looked at the other (white) American expatriate poets of the Lost Generation as intrinsically bourgeois artists, at odds with his primal concerns, which were of political (and precisely Marxist) nature<sup>19</sup>.

The process of the integral exposition and reification of the body, carried out through the medicalization of the diseased man of *The Clinic*, is thus used by McKay as a rhetorical strategy to disavow an

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<sup>19</sup> Holcomb, however, remarks the centrality of McKay’s queer identity and his personal fight for sexual freedom, maintaining that «his sexual difference unites with Marxist-Trotskyist revolutionary internationalism and radical ethnic nationalism to be articulated as a transgressive force against reactionary, imperialist hegemony. McKay’s black Marxism cannot be disentangled from his queer resistance» (Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay* cit., p. 12). As for the opposition between sexual and class/ethnicity struggles in McKay’s works, the will to distance himself from what he presumably considered a negative prototype of black masculinity and to foresee a possible standard for a new, disciplined and viable, model is significantly expressed in his probably most popular novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928). In the novel, he opposes the two main characters, Jake and Ray, the former eager to enjoy the 1920s Harlem hectic scene, the latter more attentive to the social and political issues that, at the time, black people were increasingly concerned with. As Holcomb remarks, «On one level McKay is suggesting that his actual autobiographical semblance is Ray, not Jake, the closeted homosexual in *Home to Harlem*. On another level, one may conclude that McKay wishes to conceal his sexual orientation by performing a recognizably hard-boiled masculinism, and certainly there is something in this» (Gary E. Holcomb, *Diaspora Cruises* cit., p. 736).

image of blackness he nevertheless embodies in his closeted life; the poetic self that comments on what happens to the hospitalized man, on the contrary, evokes the public persona McKay aspires to identify with, an idea of the poet as sympathetic and compassionate (and, some time, subtly contemptuous) of, but ostensibly detached from, the negative model of male blackness epitomized by the dying patient. Thus, the need to cast a derogatory glance on homosexuality is strategic to McKay's attempt to transcend corporeality in order to achieve his own aesthetical paradigm of a poetic persona.

The use of a highly sophisticated poetic idiom in *The Clinic*, rich in references to what McKay reputed to be the most outstanding poetic works of the time, serves his aim to distance the poetic voice from any possible identification with the objectified hospitalized man. The poetic persona visibly aspires at aligning himself with the major representatives of modernist poetry, which is a key step in producing the idea of a model of new black masculinity. Thus, the process of disembodiment of the poetic voice that McKay carries out throughout the ten poems of *The Clinic* responds to aesthetic needs, besides the more overtly political ones I mentioned above. McKay wants the transcendence of the homosexual, diseased black body he portrays in *The Clinic* to be instrumental to establishing a new, allegedly progressive standard of black male subjectivity. However, and more problematically, in so utterly abjecting the diseased body, he unwittingly states his own identification not just with a new model of blackness, but rather with a supposedly neutral and universal poetic persona, which is actually white. In this sense, the figure of T.S. Eliot is paramount to define the aesthetic standards McKay tries to conform with<sup>20</sup>. The repeated references and quotes from Eliot's most renowned

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Holcomb identifies the various poetic sources that might have influenced McKay in writing *The Clinic*: «Most notably, he wrote the cycle of poems he called "The Clinic," circa 1923, produced while he was laid up for a syphilis treatment. Included in this extraordinarily grim but inspired batch of Baudelairean lyrics is

poems, in fact, serve his need to reject the stereotypical figure of the black male (and homosexual) body as intrinsically saturated with sexuality and lust (and, as such, a shameful site of identification to disavow)<sup>21</sup>. However, in this case McKay's aim is that of enhancing his "incorporeal" poetic ego, in this trying to share with T.S. Eliot the same disillusioned perspective on his society and, in general, on modernity.

Any analysis of *The Clinic*, thus, would benefit from the preemptive assumption that the whole collection is addressed to two specific ideal readers: the new black proletarian hero, on the one hand, and the high modernist poet, on the other. In establishing a privileged relation with these two fantasized addressees, McKay sets up a male bond, closely tying himself and his poetic persona to these two symbolic and cathected figures he aims at identifying with. Homosexuality is, as I pointed out before, the major hindrance in achieving such double identification, given the predominantly political focus of the former, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the allegedly universal and neutral (that is to say, as a matter of fact, heterosexual) nature of the latter. The abjection of homosexuality is effectively carried out through its equation with illness, and by making the homosexual body

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"The Desolate City," a poem inflected by wasteland imagery but more explicitly resembling the Victorian poet James Thomson's Dantesque "City of Dreadful Night" (1882)» (Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay* cit., p. 132).

<sup>21</sup> The expression "thoroughly saturated with sexuality" is used by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978, or. ed. 1976, p. 104). It is referred to the process of hysterization of women's bodies, which Foucault lists among the «four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex» (*Ivi*, p. 103), and seems to me perfectly suitable for the myth of the black (homo)sexualized body that McKay tries to explode, though upholding, to some degree, the very biases he is apparently against.

predictably coincide with the sick body, both designed, and consequently scorned, as integrally saturated with sexuality<sup>22</sup>.

From what we have seen so far, the rhetoric and ideological subtext of *The Clinic* is rooted in what Eve K. Sedgwick has termed “homosexual panic”, a site of symbolic threat that, at the same time, validates and regulates bonds between allegedly heterosexual men, by warning them about the risk of trespassing that invisible and disputable line that separates legitimate homosociality (that is, the socially sanctioned bond commonly existing among heterosexual men) from stigmatized homosexuality. Homosexual panic establishes its regulating force by not explicitly marking this symbolic divide, and thus keeping men under the unfathomable threat of homosexuality<sup>23</sup>. *The Clinic* enacts a similar dynamics, using syphilis as the trigger of abjection. Homosexual panic (and its implicit counterpart, internalized homophobia) poses a threat to *The Clinic*'s poetic self who, in order to ostensibly reject any allegation of homosexuality, uses the diseased homosexual body as, at the same time, a scapegoat and a warning: morally responsible for his own condition, this body serves as a reminder of the risks deriving from (homosexual) sex.

As for the bonds of identification that the poem tries to establish, the most ostensible one is, as I hinted at above, to T.S. Eliot, the most iconic representative of modernist poetry. *The Clinic*'s debts to Eliot are numerous: especially the seventh poem in the collection, *The Desolate City*, can be read, beginning with its title, as a loose rewriting of *The Waste Land*, with the noticeable difference that, whereas the

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<sup>22</sup> William J. Maxwell, for these reasons, remarks the «pre-echoes of AIDS elegy» that can be detected in *The Clinic* (*Notes to the Poems*, in Claude McKay, *Complete Poems* cit., p. 340).

<sup>23</sup> To use Sedgwick's words, homosexual panic is «the most private form in which men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail», this paranoia making «graphic the mechanisms of homophobia» (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, pp. 89 and 91).

latter's overarching span addresses modernity in its entirety, McKay seems to narrow his scope to essentially focus on his own (or the poetic voice's) individual self, who complains about the grief and the anxiety suffered because of the desolation he is surrounded with, a shrinking of scope signaled by the shift from "Land" to "City". As McKay defines the poem, it is «largely symbolic: a composite evocation of the clinic, my environment, condition and mood»<sup>24</sup>.

Also the first poem of the entire collection, entitled *Fixture*, starts off by clearly evoking Eliot. Subtle references, like «the little grass plots in brown repose» (197, which immediately brings to mind Eliot's "dead land" in the second line of *The Burial of the Dead*), are combined with explicit quotes, like «the patients come ... and go» (*Ibidem*), a clear homage to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which recurs in other passages of the poem. This reference helps clarifying the definition of the poetic persona of *The Clinic* as normatively heterosexual and authoritative, and, as such, entitled to look down upon the hospitalized man whose body is observed and minutely scrutinized throughout the first half of the poem. The poem immediately produces, from its very beginning, a sharp opposition between the patient and the external gaze fixed upon him: the eye that scrutinizes the sick body, on the one hand, expresses the poet's projected self that, as I have previously suggested, claims his status as the neutral observer; the patient's body, on the other hand, is treated as an object to be displayed before the impartial, detached (medical) gaze of the poet/poetic voice, and, as such, is entirely reified, equated to the vast array of objects that make up the scene of the hospital:

And he stays fixed  
Like the walls, like the cots.  
And yellow is his blood,  
Like the grass blades in the plots. (197)

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<sup>24</sup> Claude McKay, *A Long Way* cit., p. 178.

In this first poem of the collection, the references to syphilis are unquestionable, though the description fails to elucidate at which stage of the evolution of the illness the patient is. The «chancre corroding his throat» would suggest that syphilis is in its initial phase, but the continuous references to mental insanity («sans thought or reason», «his mind was an oven of fire», «brave with the bravery of madness», 197-198) surely imply that he is close to the final stage of the disease, this hypothesis being also confirmed by his death, bleakly announced in the fourth poem (*Patient*).

Along with the scrupulous references to illness and its bodily manifestations, the poet sets forth his moral biases, which will be obstinately repeated through the end of the poem. As for *Fixture*, he alludes to syphilis, and to the condition suffered by the man, as the «furnace of victims of sin» (197), implicitly identifying sin matter-of-factly as the origin of the illness, although no overt moral bias is expressed; later on, even more clearly, he provides an almost ominous explanation for syphilis:

... the vengeance-crazed gods in their ire  
Consign  
Their unfortunate wrecks of desire. (198)

Rather than an actual religious subtext (the poet's conversion to Catholicism is still far to come), here McKay uses religious lexicon and overtones to evoke the stigma attached to those who suffer from syphilis, immediately associating their medical and clinical condition with moral depravity. Whether or not the poetic persona is fully endorsing this questionable moral position is beyond the scope of this study of *The Clinic*; the present reading is instead concerned with the rhetorical strategies deployed by McKay in displacing illness and death onto an objectified and abjected other, so as to align the disembodied

voice of the poet with a supposedly neutral and universal subject. It is from the latter's positioning that the other patient, the one who will survive, observes and describes the experience of bodily pain and decay, as an all-encompassing gaze. This disembodied subject, whose cultural capital (in terms of intellectual prestige and, consequently, social distinction) is suggested by the repeated references to Eliot's verses, leverages its own (supposed) authority to define the spaces and codes of illness. The sick body, responsible for having yielded to sin and pleasure, has been recast to the place where illness, whether or not curable, is exposed and integrally observed, and the clinic, as a public space, thus becomes «the historically contingent but presently inescapable [space] where the discomfort and excitement of human freedom and embodiment concentrate»<sup>25</sup>. The poet's gaze upon the sick body voices his moral condemnation for the «victims of sin». The disembodied nature of the gaze also instances the poet's will to align his own figure with the representatives of high modernism, who decreed the impersonality of the poetic voice to be one of the aesthetic principles of modernist poetry. Disembodiment, moreover, is strategic to the poet's determination to explode the idea of black subjectivity as inescapably "bodied", in order to foster a new paradigm of blackness.

The authority of the poetic voice, thus, highly depends on the disembodiment of the subject that observes and scrutinizes. By exposing the diseased body in order to thoroughly decipher the signs of illness, the poet equates his role with the doctor's. The genesis of the clinic as a space in which the diseased bodies are turned into collections of signs to be deciphered and explained, as traced by Michel Foucault, implies a set of norms and implicit assumption, as to the role of the medical gaze, which might apply in the rhetorical economy of *The Clinic* as well. Medical science, in fact, is credited with the authority to use the diseased (or the dead) body as a repository of

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<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Rees, *The Clinic and the Tearoom*, in "Journal of Medical Humanities", 34, 2, 2013, p. 114.

knowledge, a sort of code that only awaits being cracked and explained. Referring to the state of the art of medical science at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Foucault compares the medical gaze to a «chemical operation, which, by isolating the component elements, made it possible to define the composition, to establish common points, resemblances, and differences with other totalities, and thus to found a classification»<sup>26</sup>. Likewise, the gaze of the poet in *The Clinic*, by encompassing the diseased body and providing it with a definite set of meanings – not only of scientific, but also (and more crucially) of social and political consequence – asserts its own authority, which ultimately depends on the bond it establishes with sanctioned and legitimate sites of male identification McKay implicitly conjures up and engages with, namely, the black proletarian hero and the modernist aesthete.

The second poem of *The Clinic*, way shorter than the first one, confirms this assumption and entirely focuses on the man's physical decline. Though probably written a year after *Fixture*, this second piece nevertheless functions as its aptest gloss, in concentrating in only eight lines a vivid description of the effects of syphilis. Whereas in *Fixture*, however, the author uses a jargon that better suits the description of the actual manifestations of syphilis («the chancre corroding his throat, / the poisons spreading within / ... / He looks with fixed eyes, empty eyes, / ... / he said with no life in his voice, in his eyes», 197-198), here more generic images are deployed. The very title of the section, *Mummy*, seems to convey the author's intention to evoke both the physical decay of the man and the moral stigma (to be) cast upon him, his very complexion compared to a corpse or to a body awaiting death<sup>27</sup>: «Muscle and blood dried up in decay, / leaving the skeleton. /

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Routledge, New York and London, 2003 (or. ed. 1963), p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> Remarking the poem's autobiographical overtone, Holcomb notes that «the Baudelaire-inflected "Mummy" expresses more intimately McKay's condition in



And out of that skeleton has leaked / the last reserve of marrow» (198). The word decay, together with the image of a body whose vital fluids are gradually drained, further heightens the Eliotian nuances of the poem in its entirety, remarking the lifelessness of the sick body as a synecdoche of a more universal and historically understandable condition of decline<sup>28</sup>.

As I have previously remarked, the role of the gaze is paramount to establish the moral and intellectual supremacy of the poetic voice in the description of the patient, thus undermining the apparently neutral (or even sympathetic) realism of the image provided. However, as Foucault remarks, objectivity must be the unquestioned principle that animates the physician's efforts: «the clinician's gaze and the philosopher's reflection have similar powers, because they both presuppose a structure of identical objectivity, ... in which the perceived and the perceptible may be wholly restored in a language whose rigorous form declares its origin»<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, the poetic gaze of *The Clinic*, though actually stigmatizing the diseased body, is effectively disguised as an objective and trustworthy doleful elegy of modernity.

In the fourth section of the poem, *Patient*, itself articulated into four sub-sections, the process of medicalization of the sick body is fully attained and consumed, and the very clinic slightly turns into that «very queer space» described by Geoffrey Rees, «[b]inding everyone together is an aura of voyeuristic interest, a heightened attention to doors opening and closing, a lot of craning of necks and an abundance of furtive glancing at people as they enter and exit»<sup>30</sup>. As William J. Maxwell notices, this section was originally titled *Ephebe*, so as to

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the sanatorium, his loss of skin and therefore casualty of surface identity» (Gary E. Holcomb, *Claude McKay* cit., p. 177).

<sup>28</sup> As Maxwell states, however, «McKay's diseased body of modernity is wracked by thwarted, ghastly flows, by oozing sewers rather than "stony rubbish"» (William J. Maxwell, *Notes to the Poems* cit., p. 344).

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* cit., p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Rees, *The Clinic and the Tearoom* cit., p. 112.

emphasize «the poem’s homoerotic lens and critique»<sup>31</sup>; on the other hand, McKay’s choice not to use it in the final editing of the text upholds a reading of the poem as an attempt to screen homoeroticism by giving prominence to the “neutral” function of the medical lexicon. The role of this poem in the general economy of the collection is crucial, first of all, for the openly medical lexicon employed: the man who had been so far generically referred to as «he» now becomes «the patient», as to emphasize his role and subaltern position in the medical and clinical setting. In *Patient*, moreover, the visible signs of illness are repeatedly pointed out, and what is described as the despicable sexual origin of syphilis is simultaneously restated:

... faltering he could not make the way,  
His sinews were too macilent to fight  
Tubercular and chronic gonorrhoea.  
...  
Before the noon he gave the last sad moan,  
Succumbing to the fierce assaulting germs,  
That harshly finished their foul work to cast  
His empty carcase to the waiting worms. (201)

In the entire poem, the patient’s supposedly unrestrained sexual behavior dovetails with his homoerotic identity, thus designated as the essential, albeit remote, cause of his medical condition. Apart from the poem’s original title, references to the patient’s sexual orientation can be detected, in fact, in the poet’s repeated allusions to a mythicized past in which homosexuality was not stigmatized. Though the poet apparently absolves the protagonist’s sexual behavior by projecting it into an idealized historical past, and thus seems to be expressing his compassion toward the sick man, as a matter of fact he ultimately refers to medicalized (and, consequently, stigmatized) homosexuality as the patient’s only possible site of identification. After a vague reference to

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<sup>31</sup> William J. Maxwell, *Notes to the Poems* cit., p. 340.

the «malady of Lust» (199), in fact, he goes on by explicitly remarking that:

If he had lived in high Renaissance days,  
He might have moved a Michel Angelo;  
And Raphael might have put angelic rays  
Around his golden head and made it glow.

...

But in this Age of Hypocrites afraid  
And smug of rank respectabilities,  
He chose the dubious freedom of the shade  
The way of easy opportunities. (200)

The two quatrains are noteworthy for a number of reasons: first, they provide some of the patient's most noticeable physical details, by referring, for instance, to «his golden head», which might suggest that the man is not black. McKay visibly clears any suspicion as to his possible identification with the man (by remarking the latter's ethnic background as likely Caucasian), despite the autobiographical nature of the writing; this detail all the more emphasizes homosexual panic, self-hatred and dis-identification as crucial, albeit involuntary, subtexts of the poem. Moreover, by remarking the sharp contrast between the «high Renaissance days» and «this Age of Hypocrites», McKay tries at least to provide a historical rationale for the justification or legitimation of homosexuality, resorting to the well-established cliché of the “golden age” of sexual freedom, significantly cast in a different milieu than the one in which he lives and operates. Even according to this scheme, however, homosexuality is tolerable provided that it is dignified by artists, thus reinforcing the implicit assumption that sex and the body have to be transcended and sublimated through art in order for the homosexual subject to be acknowledged as legitimate.

Finally, however disputable this attempt at historicizing male same-sex desire may be, what especially counts here is the emphasis with

which McKay naturalizes the connection between homosexuality and illness, which is here evidently taken for granted. The reference to the man's «sympathetic friends», in the third section of the poem, hints at a taxonomic perception of homosexuality, which assumes homosexuals as invariably part of a homogeneous group. Homosexuals are credited with being sympathetic toward and supportive of each other, and nevertheless doomed, as the poem exemplarily displays, to fall victims of their own desires. The male homosexual body, thus, is eventually reduced to an «empty carcass», symbolically prey of «waiting worms» (201), despite the apparently kindhearted and compassionate eye through which the neutral and disembodied poetic persona of *The Clinic* tries to address the protagonist of the poem.

When, in the second part of the poem, the focus shifts from the patient to the poetic self that narrates his own story, the general tone of the verses dramatically changes. The poems collected in *The Clinic*, in fact, gradually turn into a grandiose metaphor of the modern society and its relentless decay, increasingly reminiscent of Eliot's production. The split in *The Clinic*'s poetic voice I referred above is fully visible in the very first lines of the seventh poem, second in length to *Patient*, and even more reminiscent of *The Waste Land* than the remainder of the collection. *The Desolate City* starts off with these illuminating lines:

My spirit is a pestilential city,  
With misery triumphant everywhere,  
Glutted with baffled hopes and human pity. (203)

The process of disembodiment has been fully carried out: whereas the patient is essentially reduced to his body, meant to serve as a synecdoche for illness and a metaphor for homosexuality, when the poet's focus shifts to himself, emphasis is laid on a disembodied «spirit». Instead of the obsession with the body that characterizes the first sections of *The Clinic*, thus, spirit is called forth to act as the main,

if not the only, protagonist of this specific poem. Body and spirit, guilt and pity are thus the distinct polarities around which the narrative and figurative material of the collection revolves. Whereas the agony of the diseased man is elegiacally recounted and graphically described until his death in the first part of the collection, now the poet veers towards more abstract and elusive topics. In *The Desolate City*, references to illness are filtered through complex metaphors, aimed at providing a general overview of the poet's perspective upon the place where he is confined:

Above its wall the air is heavy-wet,  
Brooding in fever mood and hanging thick  
Round empty tower and broken minaret,  
Settling upon the tree tops stricken sick  
...  
Yet life, still lingers, questioningly strange,  
Timid and quivering, naked and alone,  
Against the cycle of disruptive change. (203-205)

The passages in which illness is evoked in more detailed and material terms, as in *Pageant*, are about minor characters, as in the stanzas devoted to a mother that «brings her bare kneed student boy... who spent, perhaps, his meager dole to buy / a night of pleasure at a cheap whore's breast» (206). Sex is once again to blame as the cause of disease; however, these lines can hardly be compared with the poignancy of the first four sections about of the dying patient's illness. The final part of the collection – except for the two brief final poems (*The Needle* and *Convalescing*) that, as a valediction, focus on the poet's personal experience of illness and medical treatment – further heighten the poems' metaphoric character: the clinic is compared to a pageant, «a harsh romance of ancient times, / A modern version of a scripture tale», where «the blind, the almost dumb, the insane, / the lame with crutches ... / The epileptic ... / The deaf, the paralytic

crossed with care» are gathered together (205). The first two stanzas of *Pageant*, thus, rather than providing an actual description of the clinic, conjure up the ship of fools evoked by Michel Foucault at the very beginning of his *Madness and Civilization*, the «stultifera navis» he symbolically considers the first of all the institutions of interment established during the Modern era<sup>32</sup>. The overall effect is that of a substantial abstraction of the reality of actual patients into symbolic figures.

An even stronger sense of disembodiment, thus, closes the collection. Claude McKay, «a reluctant participant in the [Harlem] renaissance»<sup>33</sup>, deploys the opposition between the medical/poetic gaze and the diseased male body in order to objectify the latter and thus, indirectly, point out its flaws and its insubordination. This move allows him to channel his own aesthetic and political predicaments through the ostensible neutrality and scientific objectivity of the medical gaze. The clinic, «where the movement between a hyperbolic sense of self and loss of all consciousness of self is rife»<sup>34</sup>, functions as a symbolic space that negotiates the gains and the losses of McKay's struggle for identity, and illness becomes his most effective tool to redefine the paradigms of black manhood according to his standards of male identification. Staging the stigma of both syphilis and decadent homosexuality, thus, allows McKay to reaffirm a standard of healthy black virility, and to tentatively sketch a model for a viable, but nevertheless problematic, new black masculinity.

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, Routledge, New York and London, 2001 (or. ed. 1961), ch. 1 (pp. 1 and *passim*).

<sup>33</sup> Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race* cit., p. 267

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Rees, *The Clinic and the Tearoom* cit., p. 115.

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