

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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THE JOURNEY OF MCKAY'S PROLETARIAN SONNET AND ITS CULTURAL NETWORK: FROM NEW YORK VIA LONDON AND VIENNA TO LJUBLJANA¹

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Claude McKay was the first African-American poet to become renowned for writing socially-engaged sonnets, most of which he published between 1917 and 1923 at the peak of his poetic and writing career. McKay was the inventor of the so-called proletarian type of sonnet, which brought to the fore Marxist analysis of systemic exploitation, capitalism, racism, and imperialism. This contribution explores the journey of McKay's proletarian sonnet across the Atlantic via Sylvia Pankhurst's newspaper *The Workers Dreadnought* in 1919 and via Anna Nussbaum's anthology *Afrika singt* in 1929. The latter turned out to be of significance for the Balkans, more specifically for the circle of the socialist literati gathered around the *Ljubljanski zvon* magazine. Through the endeavours and commitment of this group, including Mile Klopčič and with the help of Louis Adamic, McKay's proletarian sonnet entered the South Slavic cultural landscape in the early 1930s, only three years after Nussbaum's publication of *Afrika singt*.

Keywords: Claude McKay, proletarian sonnet, Sylvia Pankhurst, Anna Nussbaum, Mile Klopčič, Louis Adamic, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

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INTRODUCTION

Claude McKay (1889–1948) was the first African-American communist poet and inventor of the proletarian sonnet. He was renowned for his socially-engaged

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sonnets that focused on the plight of the systemically abused and downtrodden working majority. His proletarian sonnets offered a perfidious analysis of systemic exploitation and the role institutional racism continues to play in this scheme. McKay's sonnets carried anti-capitalist messages, containing a resonating clarion call for a socialist revolution, inspired by the 1917 October Revolution, as the answer to structural injustices and an antidote to Western imperialism and racism. McKay, who was born in Jamaica and came to the USA in 1912 on a stipend to study at an agricultural college, published most of his proletarian sonnets between 1917 and 1923, which was the peak of his poetic career. During this time, his sonnets of social analysis and protest, grounded in materialist dialecticism, were individually published on both sides of the Atlantic in what were the central anglophone USA and UK socialist journals of the time. The most prominent among these included the Eastmans' *Liberator*² in the USA and Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Workers' Dreadnought*³ in the UK (James 2022: 248; Brown 2019). It was via

² The New-York based *Liberator* (1918–1924) was a sequel to the workers' monthly magazine *The Masses*, which the American government suppressed upon the entry of the American capitalist establishment into WWI and in the context of the massive deportations of communists and socialists from the USA after the passing of the 1918 Immigration Act (Carrier 2015: 107). Under the same editorial leadership of the Leninist brother-sister team of Max and Crystal Eastman, the *Liberator* continued to feature an array of political and artistic writings that endorsed the labour movement and socialist revolution, albeit with more space "being devoted to economic and social affairs" (Helbling 1973: 49; Holcomb 2007: 2). *The Liberator* was the leading Marxist magazine in the USA, which also offered "a first-rate international news coverage", familiarizing its readership with the socio-political situation workers faced in Europe (Goodman 2009). Due to financial problems that peaked in 1922, the monthly was rescued and effectively taken over by the Communist Party of America. It then merged with three other publications into a new magazine, first named *The Workers Monthly*, and *The Communist* after 1927 (Goodman 2009).

³ *The Workers' Dreadnought* was a London-based weekly, which started out as *The Woman's Dreadnought* in 1914, following Sylvia Pankhurst's fallout with her mother and sister over the course the suffragette movement was to pursue. The movement catered to the interests of well-to-do women and claimed working-class women were incapable of fighting for the cause, even constituting a major hindrance to the movement's political aims (Connelly 2013: 29). The aim was to secure the right to vote for the well-to-do and to preserve their class privileges at the expense of the rest of women, which was known as "partial enfranchisement" (Davis 1999: 58–62; Crawford 2006: 180; Connelly 2013: 29). In the first issue of *The Woman's Dreadnought*, Sylvia Pankhurst lashed out against the class-biased policy of the WSPU, the central suffragette organization headed by her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel Pankhurst, demanding instead universal suffrage for all women (and men): "Some people tell us that it is neither specially important that working women should agitate for the Vote, nor specifically important that they should have it. They forget that comparatively, the leisured comfortably situated women are but a little group, and the working-women a multitude" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014 n. pag.). Another central controversy concerned the fact that the WSPU saw the right to vote as an automatic panacea for all social problems while Sylvia Pankhurst and the rest of class-conscious women saw the right to vote as one of many interconnected parts of a larger

Pankhurst's *The Workers Dreadnought*, which republished a selection of McKay's first proletarian sonnets from the July 1919 edition of the *Liberator*, that McKay's sonnets of social protest and along with them a new genre of proletarian sonnet crossed the Atlantic, thus making its first foray into the European continent. Meanwhile, back in the USA, McKay's sonnets of protest against systemic exploitation, racism and imperialism signalled the beginning of the so-called New Negro movement and helped to usher in the Harlem Renaissance (Foley 2008: 2). Cumulatively, the emergence of McKay's proletarian sonnets led to a major paradigm shift in the English-speaking editorial circles engaged with class struggle on both sides of the Atlantic (Tolson 1954: 290; James 2022: 231–275). Specifically, McKay's sonnets and his journalistic contributions promulgated the need for the systemically exploited to address racism. And more so, to recognize racism as an ideological trap and a tool of division brutally wielded by the capitalist establishment in its effort not only to suppress wages but to control workers by fragmenting their movement for systemic social justice and destroying its unified front.

Collected for the first time in *Harlem Shadows* and published in the USA in 1922, McKay's proletarian sonnets eventually drew the attention of Anna Nussbaum, an established Viennese writer and translator. It was through her efforts that McKay's proletarian sonnets were translated into German and included in the first European anthology of Harlem Renaissance poetry, published in Vienna in

struggle for social change (Connelly 2013: 29). That was the fight for systemic social justice based upon the annulment of systemic exploitation, poverty, and a lack of basic socio-economic rights. In other words, political issues were to be connected with social and economic ones, which was of crucial importance for the well-being of the working majority that included women and men alike. This led Sylvia Pankhurst to establish the East London Federation of Suffragettes in 1914 with its own weekly paper *The Woman's Dreadnought* that focused on the plight of working-class women while shedding light on the structural causes of poverty and disenfranchisement affecting working-class men and women alike. Or, as pointed out by Claude McKay himself: "[Pankhurst] left the suffragette legion for the working-class movement, when she discovered that the leading ladies of the legion were not interested in the condition of working women" (McKay 2007: 64). The movement was renamed the Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF) in 1916 and the paper into *The Workers' Dreadnought* in 1917 to reflect its embrace of revolutionary socialism (Davis 1999: xiii – xiv). Under Pankhurst's editorship, *The Workers' Dreadnought* retained a strong focus on the need for the systemic liberation of women, a goal which it recognized could be truly and fully attained only through a socialist revolution (Connelly 2013: 103). At the same time, it became the leading British communist avantgarde weekly, which combined the fight against capitalism with anti-imperialism and anti-racism and the first to recognize and condemn the rise of fascism (Davis 1999: 94). Just as importantly, it was the first British socialist journal to endorse the October Revolution, with Pankhurst establishing the "People's Russia Information bureau". This in turn for a long time put *The Workers' Dreadnought* on the map as the only news outlet to provide accurate information on the October Revolution and its major achievements (Davis 1999: xiv).

1929. This was the second time that McKay's single-handedly-invented subgenre of proletarian sonnet crossed the Atlantic, making inroads into the European continent through the collaborative effort of various literati and editors, this time to Europe's German-speaking areas. This proved to be of crucial significance for the Balkans, specifically for the socialist circles of literati associated with the magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* (*Ljubljana's Bell*) in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was through Nussbaum's 1929 anthology, titled *Afrika singt*, that Mile Klopčič, a member of this set and a poet proficient in German, came across McKay's proletarian sonnets. Spurred on by the then editor of *Ljubljanski zvon*, who sympathized with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Mile Klopčič chose to translate the proletarian sonnet "The Tired Worker" as McKay's representative piece to be published in the 1932 edition of *Ljubljanski zvon*. Through this amazing cross-Atlantic networking of like-minded socially engaged poets, writers and editors, the proletarian sonnet entered the socialist avantgarde literary landscape of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the cultural landscape of the South Slavic peoples in general.

This contribution traces the trajectory of McKay's proletarian sonnet's double foray into the European continent and how it eventually found its way into the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the early 1930s, that is, merely fifteen years after its emergence. For this reason, the contribution falls into two topical parts. The first section deals with Claude McKay as a Marxist African-American poet, a poet conscious of class and race, and delineates the socio-political context of the late 1910s that gave rise to McKay's proletarian sonnet. This section also simultaneously discusses the first Atlantic crossing of McKay's selected proletarian sonnets with "If We Must Die" featuring as the central piece, a journey that took place under the editorial auspices of Sylvia Pankhurst. Pankhurst was the pivotal editorial figure to introduce McKay's proletarian sonnet to the European, albeit anglophone audiences. The second topical section focuses on the repeat journey McKay's genre of proletarian sonnet took across the Atlantic twelve years later, this time via its German-speaking areas, to eventually make it to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (in the form of "The Tired Worker") with the help of editorial and literati figures such as Anna Nussbaum and Louis Adamic. This goes to show that without the crossing of the paths and intense networking of people sharing both a wholehearted dedication to socialist causes and an understanding of the place of culture in promoting systemic social justice, our once common South Slavic space would have been deprived of a literary form geared toward cultivating class consciousness.

MCKAY'S PROLETARIAN SONNET: ITS FIRST VOYAGE TO EUROPE

McKay was born in Jamaica, where he received a classical education. He came to the USA in 1912 to study "scientific agriculture" in Kansas but soon decided to drop out of college and to eventually move to Harlem in New York in 1914 (Brown 2019: 28; Pedersen 1997: 198; Eastman 1919: 7).⁴ Here he scraped a living as a manual worker, while dedicating himself to writing poetry that would challenge "racial and economic inequities" (The Poetry Foundation, n. pag.). Once in the USA, McKay was immediately recategorized as an "African-American" on the basis of his skin colour, although technically speaking he was a British subject (McKay 2007: 167). He was relegated to the serving underclass of the urban superexploited, which is how he got to know the hardships of African-Americans, or as McKay himself put it: "It was not until I was forced down among the rough body of the great serving class of Negroes that I got to know my Aframerica" (qtd. in James 2022: 218). Elsewhere, he writes: "I waded through the muck and the scum" by having to take on the least paid manual jobs African-Americans were confined to, ranging from being a janitor, porter, barman to a waiter on trains (McKay 2007: 10). In other words, McKay made his living "in every one of the ways the northern [African-Americans] do, from pot-wrestling in a boarding-house kitchen to dining-car service on the New York and Washington express" (qtd. in James 2022: 218). Out of this experience he emerged as an "African-American worker-intellectual" with a keen interest in "US race relations and the labour movement" (Maxwell 2004: xxxi).

As the only (internationally renowned) early Marxist poet of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay did not fall for the trappings of essentialist identity politics. For this reason, he also found himself in the crosshairs with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), headed by W. E. B. Du Bois (McKay and de Bois 1921: 102–103). The fact that he did not subscribe to identity politics but socialist causes, understanding full well that racism and capitalism are two sides of the same coin rather than supposedly parallel systems that occasionally simply intersect, set him apart from the rest of his middle-class peers of the Harlem Renaissance (Helbling 1973: 49). The struggle against racism is a class issue, and it is an indispensable part of the socialist movement truly committed

⁴ Parts of the first half of this section are based on my earlier research, published in *Acta Neophilologica* 56, 172: 91–106 under the title "Old aesthetics, new ethics: Claude McKay's socially engaged (proletarian) sonnets", and reused here by permission of *Acta's* editor-in-chief.

to systemic social change. McKay reinforced this point in his December 1922 speech to the delegates of the Third International's Fourth congress in Moscow:

I feel that my race is honoured by this invitation to one of its members to speak at this Fourth Congress of the Third International. My race on this occasion is honoured, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world regardless of race or colour, and this stand of the Third International is not made merely on paper like the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing. (McKay 2005: 8)

As a socialist, McKay therefore would not write from the narrow and counter-productive "perspective of a Black person in a white man's world", a standpoint that obscures systemic inequalities and their structural causes. Instead, he insisted on writing from "the perspective of the Black working class, the Black poor, the Black 'masses,' in a racist and class-stratified society" (James 2022: 218).

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To realize this agenda, McKay both revived and modernized the old, fixed form of the sonnet. He replaced its traditional subject matter of unrequited love, rendered formulaic by the Renaissance poets, with that of burning socio-economic and political issues of the early twentieth century. In place of lovers' laments over unattainable and unfulfilled love, he put forward systemic hardships. As noted by critics, McKay's choice of the sonnet as his main poetic outlet was not accidental but was "specifically selected to illustrate the poet's political agenda" (Keller 1994: 451). The fact that McKay chose to rely on the sonnet as a widely recognized form of poetic expression allowed him to perform a number of remarkable, even extraordinary, achievements. First, he could take advantage of the sonnet's highly delineated argumentative structure and use it as a compact form of argument against the social and economic inequalities of the capitalist order, an order based on systemic exploitation "amplified by racial discrimination" (Miller 2021: n. pag.). Secondly, McKay's strategic adoption of the sonnet helped to open the doors to McKay's political Marxist message⁵ not only among the targeted audience, that is the socialist revolutionaries of all kinds, but also among "sonnet-fanciers"

⁵ McKay of course was not the first sonneteer to give the form a political connotation. One of the first sonneteers to do so was John Milton (1608–1674), who blazed the trail with his sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" (1673). But it was McKay who in the 1910s and the early 1920s infused the highly aestheticized form of the sonnet with a new political perspective, marked by social realism and class antagonism. McKay thus "both revived and modernized the old, fixed form

from a more affluent background that otherwise would never have touched socialist material at all (Maxwell 2004: xvi). And crucially, the traditional sonnet form allowed him to cross not only class boundaries more easily but also those of nation-states. The internationally recognized sonnet form made it easier for his political message to travel and transcend national borders and for that reason also continents (Maxwell 2004: xxxvi). The instant cross-Atlantic popularity of one of his first and most outstanding proletarian sonnets "If We Must Die" on both sides of the Atlantic – according to McKay himself, "a notorious poem" that in 1919 "pushed [him] forward as one of the spokesmen of Negro radicalism in America" (McKay 2005: 8) – proves this point.

McKay's landmark proletarian sonnet "If we must die" was first published in the American monthly socialist magazine the *Liberator* on 17th July 1919 along with five other poems under the heading "Sonnets and Songs by Claude McKay". These included "The Negro Dancers", "The Barrier", "After the Winters", "A Capitalist at Dinner", "The Little Peoples", and "A Roman Holiday", of which the last three were also sonnets (McKay 1919a: 20–21). Importantly, the editor Max Eastman chose to provide a brief introduction, in which he first points out he has "the good fortune to publish this month a page of sonnets and songs by a negro poet practically unknown to the public" (Eastman 1919: 7). Then he cuts straight to the point by introducing McKay as a proletarian black writer. He goes on to say: "At the time when these poems were written he was a waiter in a dining car – a position from which he was able to see a great many things and understand them with a bold and unhesitating mind" (Eastman 1919: 7). This pivotal emphasis was reproduced literally verbatim by Sylvia Pankhurst in her 6th September 1919 edition of *The Workers' Dreadnought*, which carried three of four McKay's sonnets first published in the *Liberator* just two months prior. In a short preface under the heading "A negro poet", Pankhurst explains: "We take from the New York *Liberator* these poems by Claude McKay, a negro of Jamaica, who, when he wrote them, was a waiter in an American dining car" (Pankhurst 1919: 1455). This runs contrary to Brown's claim that it was Pankhurst who first introduced McKay not as a black poet but as a black proletarian poet. In fact, it was both editors of the then most progressive anglophone socialist journals, each on their respective side of the Atlantic, that drew attention to McKay as a proletarian sonnet writer. In this way, they helped to "frame the value of his poems as sociological and political rather than aesthetic (Brown 2019: 33). It was McKay's

landmark sonnet "If We Must Die" that first made it across the Atlantic together with two other sonnets from the 1919 July edition of *Liberator*. These were "The Little Peoples" and "A Roman Holiday", which Sylvia Pankhurst chose to republish in her September 1919 issue of *The Workers' Dreadnought*.⁶

"If We Must Die", which set the tone and the context for the rest of the sonnets published in the same volume of the *Liberator* in New York and *The Workers' Dreadnought* in London, emerged out of the Red Summer in 1919. The Red Summer refers to the brutal "political repression of leftists and the bloody suppression of black rebellion" against structural inequalities and systemic, institutional injustices, running rife in the USA (Foley 2008: vii). Immediately after WWI, the US was seized by a wave of wild-cat strikes as the government had repressed legal strikes upon US entry into the war in 1917 and then carried out massive deportations of communists, anarchists and left trade-union leaders upon the passing of the 1918 Immigration Act (Carrier 2015: 107). Despite this, in 1919 every seventh worker was on strike (Foley 2008: 9). The USA was gripped by an economic crisis triggered by the shutting down of the war industry in big urban centres, and by the closing of the European markets to USA agricultural exports, especially cotton and corn, which together with speculations in food bonds devastated the American agricultural sector (Durst Johnson 2006: 122). McKay wrote "If We Must Die" in direct response to white racist mobs attacking African-Americans all over the USA, especially in the industrial centres of the North. These were headed by organized paramilitaries, financed and controlled by prominent local business groups and politicians (Abu-Lughod 2007: 61, 65). In his memoirs, McKay sheds light on the socio-economic situation that gave rise to the birth of his landmark sonnet: "The World War had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white" (McKay 2007: 29). He goes on to write:

⁶ "The Capitalist at Dinner" was not republished by Pankhurst. Unlike the other three sonnets that reverberate with meticulous, riveting analysis of the broader geopolitical situation, "The Capitalist" is an allegory and a metonymy, riveted in more abstract terms. James defines it as a "classical realist agitprop" and speculates that the poem "may very well have drawn upon McKay's experience as a waiter, obliged to serve the rich and the powerful" (James 2022: 252). The sonnet in its entirety reads as following: "An Ugly Figure, heavy, overfed, / Settles uneasily into a chair; / Nervously he mops his pimply pink bald head, / Frowns at the fawning waiter standing near. / The entire service tries its best to please / This overpampered piece of broken-health, / Who sits there thoughtless, querulous, obese, / Wrapped in his sordid visions of vast wealth. // Great God! If creatures like this money-fool, / Who hold the service of mankind so cheap, / Over the people must forever rule, / Driving them at their will like helpless sheep - / Then let proud mothers cease from giving birth; / let human beings perish from the earth" (McKay 1919a: 20; McKay 2004: 136).

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. [...] It was during those days that the sonnet, "If We Must Die," exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. (McKay 2007: 29–30)

McKay's landmark sonnet references the rebellion of African-Americans in response to racially charged and economically underlined pogroms against their ghettoized proletarian communities. African-Americans, who moved from the South to the North during the last phase of the Great Migration in order to fill hundreds of thousands of industrial posts left vacant by conscripted whites during WWI, were to function as scapegoats for the social ills brought about by massive layoffs, rising unemployment and harsher living conditions in post-war USA.

After the return of white veterans from WWI to their former jobs and in the wake of the economic recession, African-Americans lost their industrial jobs on a massive scale (James 2022: 236; Abu-Lughod 2007: 56). In Chicago alone, almost 15,000 African-American workers were dismissed overnight never to be rehired (Abu-Lughod 2007: 58). The deep post-war economic crisis provided the macro framework for the ensuing racial violence. The capitalist elite, through media outlets it owned and by financing paramilitary groups, whipped up racial hatred precisely at the point when "labour strife and fears of joblessness combined to make white ethnic labor more militant and blacks less accepting of their reduced status" (Abu-Lughod 2007: 56; Foley 2008: 13–14). Chicago was the city where the most prolonged race attacks of the Red Summer took place, between August 27 and September 8, leading to the death of 38 people (23 black) and to 537 injured people (James 2022: 234). However, this time, fascist white America, as McKay poignantly noted, encountered resistance. Black communities, betrayed and left defenceless by white law-enforcement institutions, organized their own system of defence with the help of returning black war veterans who found themselves jobless and with nothing to lose (James 2022: 236; Abu-Lughod 2007: 56; Fisher 2020: 25–26). For the very first time, poor proletarian black America fought back, refusing to accept the status of a scapegoat and of a passive, superexploited racialized victim. McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die" captures and extols this historical moment:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock of our accursed lot.

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!

O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

(McKay 2004: 177–178)

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In this landmark sonnet, McKay gives voice to the “militant New Negro” for whom “death is preferable to a state halfway between slavery and freedom” (James 2022: 249), that is to the newly assigned status of a waged slave. The sonnet pivots on “the focused anger of the modern Negro” (Maxwell 2004: xix), who rises up against the dehumanizing effects of systemic exploitation, where institutional racism functions as one of the operative principles of super-exploitation. The bravery of the persecuted, who are cornered by a “mad”, howling crowd of lynchers, gives them dignity in death as they courageously face and defy their enemy. The sonnet functions as a counternarrative to the Eurocentric myth of white supremacy by systematically exploding the racist constructs of animality and savagery attributed to African-Americans. In a reversal, it shows that these assigned characteristics in fact define and produce those who claim to be the carriers and guardians of “White Civilization” and capitalist America. Monstrosity and cannibalism inform the core of white capitalist America. The exclamation “O kinsmen”, signalling a volta in the argumentative structure of this Petrarchan sonnet, confirms the human status of black proletarians and detaches black America from the bestial imagery. The oppressors on the other hand, as put by Lee, “devolve from superiority to parity to a mere “pack” of beastly monsters... Though ‘they’ may ultimately win the battle, metaphorically ‘they’ have lost it” (1974: 217). The façade of white capitalist America’s civility and its democracy comes undone, with its true bestial nature fully disclosed by its own harrowing devices. White capitalist America loses the façade of humanity it has never had, while black proletarian America gains the human face it has been systematically denied to keep it superexploited.

In his sonnets, McKay undermines the official discourse of America being the land of the free, the land of opportunity, and the cradle of democracy. “The Roman Holiday” – the second of the three sonnets republished by Pankhurst in her

September 1919 issue of *The Workers' Dreadnought* – references WWI and disproves the official claim of America being a democracy that enters wars unwillingly, and if so, then, strictly for the sole purpose of defending and preserving the humanity of the peoples to whose aid it supposedly comes. In what effectively functions as an exposé of the double-speak on the part of American capitalist-political establishment, the first and the second quatrains draw attention to the lynchings of 1917, 1918 and 1919. These were the "holocaustal year[s]" (Tolson 1954: 290) for African-Americans in the USA. The Roman holiday in the title references Rome's gladiators' games. Racially driven lynchings constitute a modern twentieth-century form of debased, state-sanctioned "entertainment" thrown the way of deluded white masses of America and spurred on by paramilitaries on the payroll of their capitalist corporate sponsors and masters. Lynchings are the "modern games", and America, with every single state hosting and staging such "games", is a modern Roman gladiators' theatre. The idea is to keep the minds of white masses off burning socio-economic issues and away from the common structural enemy: that is the American capitalist establishment that exploits and pits both groups of people against each other to its greatest advantage. The first two quatrains capture this state of affairs as following:

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'Tis but a modern Roman holiday;
 Each state invokes its soul of basest passion,
 Each vies with each to find the ugliest way
 To torture Negroes in the fiercest fashion.
 Black Southern men, like hogs await your doom!
 White wretches hunt and haul you from your huts,
 They squeeze the babies out your women's womb,
 They cut your members off, rip out your guts!

(McKay 2004: 137)

The octave exposes the state-sanctioned and institutional violence embodied in systemic lynchings, which inadvertently, to further debase and dehumanize the persecuted even in their death, leads to corpses' being sexually mutilated. The third quatrain, which reads "It is a Roman holiday, and worse, / It is the mad beast risen from his lair, / The dead accusing years' eternal curse. / Reeking of vengeance, in fulfilment here" (McKay 2004: 137), and the concluding couplet constitute a separate thematic unit, a sestet, which moves the argument to a more abstract but no less effective level. As a result of this dynamic, "A Roman Holiday" is an English sonnet in terms of its structure, but an Italian sonnet in terms of its content and argument development. The closing couplet delivers

a striking blow. In the context of fully exposed institutional violence against racialized and superexploited secondary citizens unfurling on American turf, McKay ironizes the image of America as a self-appointed guardian of world democracy, which advertises itself as a model of democracy to warring European countries, gripped and devastated by nationalistic hatreds and imperialist competition for colonial exploitation of Africa and Asia. With the octave first exposing state-endorsed violence against the poorest section of America, the couplet mockingly concludes: "Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power / That saved sick Europe in her darkest hour!" (McKay 2004: 137). McKay mocks America as the beacon light of democracy whose white capitalist establishment entered WWI on a seemingly humanitarian ticket. It tears down this propaganda façade by exposing the visceral state-endorsed violence and racially motivated persecution that white capitalist America sponsors and conducts against poor black America in order to keep it placid and superexploited. The sonnet's concluding couplet shatters the American capitalist elite's framing of its 1917 entry into WWI as a self-sacrificial, humanitarian-driven act. White capitalist America cannot claim to keep Europe enlightened and safe for democracy, while on its home turf this very same establishment works feverishly towards the brutal suppression of any trace of democracy, equality and social justice for all.

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"The Little Peoples", the third proletarian sonnet of McKay's that Pankhurst chose to republish in her September 1919 edition of *The Workers' Dreadnought*, takes the condemnation of American capitalist machinery, oiled by racism and imperialism, and its pretence at democracy, to a new level. It embeds it into a broader geopolitical and global context. "The Little Peoples" evokes the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles that followed the conclusion of WWI. Clearly, WWI is recognized as an imperial war fought by Great Britain and France with Italy and the USA as associated powers against the Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman empires over the redivision of the colonies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Gerwarth and Manela 2014: 789–790). The victors repartitioned the zones of interest with German colonies in Africa going to Great Britain, France and Belgium. This was a deal sealed among the Big Four (USA, Great Britain, France and Italy) during the Paris Peace Conference and officially confirmed in the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles effectively forced Germany to renounce any claim to its colonial territories outside Europe, most of them being located in Africa (Henig 1997: 5–17). In 1916 already, France and Great Britain, in the separate secret Sykes-Picot agreement, divided the territories and provinces of the Ottoman empire among themselves. These were to be immediately placed under their protectorate or direct colonial rule at the

conclusion of WWI with Iraq and Palestine going to Great Britain and Syria and Lebanon falling under French rule (Lehr-Wagner 2004: 33). "The Little Peoples" reminds us of this broader geopolitical context. It points to the entrapment of little nations in this scheme of things, and them being used as mere pawns on the checkerboard operated by big Western imperial powers.

The sonnet denounces the role the USA and its president, the exponent of American capital, Woodrow Wilson, played in upholding the post-WWI colonial order under the false pretext of advocating the peoples' right to self-determination. "The Little Peoples" is an Italian sonnet and builds its argumentation accordingly:

The little peoples of the troubled earth,
The little nations that are weak and white,
For them the glory of another birth,
For them the lifting of the veil of night.
The big men of the world in concert met,
Have sent forth in their power a new decree:
Upon the old harsh wrongs the sun must set,
Henceforth the little peoples must be free!

But, we, the blacks less than the trampled dust,
Who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes,-
We to the ancient gods of greed and lust
Must still be offered up as sacrifice:
Oh, we who deign to live but will not dare,
The white world's burden must forever bear!

(McKay 2004: 136)

In his (in)famous speech of Fourteen Points, presented first to the US Congress in January 1918 and then vigorously pursued at the Paris Peace Conference in February 1919, Woodrow Wilson introduced the principle of "self-determination", the right to self-rule, which he selectively conferred upon Eastern European nations but denied to the colonized peoples outside Europe (Lehr Wagner 2004: 35; Calculli 2021: 138). In both cases, little peoples, regardless of their skin colour, are in fact being used as checker pieces. USA capital, working closely in cahoots with the British and the French establishment, selectively conferred the right to self-determination to Eastern European bourgeoisies in order to yank their newly created nation states from direct German influence. This move enabled French, British and American capital to more easily advance and secure its own interests in the newly opened Eastern European region. Secondly and even more crucially,

by invoking the right to self-determination and limiting it solely to newly created Eastern European bourgeois elites, the USA, along with its Western allies, in fact aimed to create a massive buffer zone against the Soviet Union (Mandel 1986: 12–13). That is why, as pointed out by the sonnet's speaker, it is to these white peoples, and little, insignificant nations on the larger chessboard of Western imperial games, that now goes the exclusive right of self-determination or "the glory of another birth" and "the lifting of the veil of night" (McKay 2004: 136). Meanwhile in the colonies, as the sonnet reminds us, the Paris Peace Conference deprived peoples of the right to self-determination, which most visibly and profoundly affected those who threw off the yoke of German imperialism in Africa only to see it replaced with its British and French counterpart (Calculi 2021: 145).⁷ For them, any glimmer of hope regarding independence from colonial rule is vanquished with the political hijacking⁸ and selective application of the principle of self-determination on the part of the USA and its Western imperial allies to advance their own colonial interests. After all, the USA itself at the time wielded its brutal colonial fist over the recently conquered territories and acquired colonies of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines and Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. There was no way the USA capitalist establishment would extend the right to self-determination to peoples on whose exploitation it heavily relied in its accumulation of capital and expropriation of resources to, amongst others, advance its own industry over European interests (Immerwahr 2019a).⁹

⁷ Africa, after all, was the prime continent over whose possession European imperial powers fought in WWI. As pointed out by Du Bois, Africa was "the Land of the Twentieth Century" (in Zinn 2005: 363) and Europe's primal target of repossession due to "the gold and diamonds of South Africa, the cocoa of Angola and Nigeria, the rubber and ivory of the Congo, the palm oil of the West Coast" (Zinn 2005: 363).

⁸ The principle of self-determination was not Woodrow's brainchild. It was first formed by Marxist socialists and introduced at the 1896 Second International conference in London. It was Lenin who first launched the principle of self-determination in his 1914 ground-breaking *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, with the crucial emphasis being that peoples have the right to exercise self-determination "in opposition to colonialism" (Calculi 2021: 138). Woodrow Wilson and the imperialist West usurped the term and twisted its meaning "with the aim of neutralizing them" and to "use self-determination as a tool to merely contain the Soviets and remake Europe through punishing Germany" (Calculi 2021: 144, 145).

⁹ It is telling that by the beginning of WWII, 19 million people lived in American colonies under direct USA occupational rule, and were stripped of full-citizenship rights including the right to vote. This meant, as pointed out by Immerwahr, that every eighth "American" in fact did not live in the USA but in the "The Greater United States of America". The number of people invaded and placed under the direct American colonial rule by far exceeded the number of African Americans in the USA states. Or as put by Immerwahr: "[O]nly about one in 12 was African American. If

Woodrow Wilson along with his Western allies believed non-white people were not capable of self-government and needed to be placed under a colonial mandate to be managed on their behalf by whites (Calculli 2021: 141). This was part of the racist ideology which still claims, as it did then, that Western imperialists supposedly come to other people's native lands not as colonizers to plunder, massacre and dispossess but as carriers of enlightenment, the sole task of which is to spread civility among the local population. The locals to be invaded and placed under white rule are constructed as non-people. They are presented as "lower on the scale of both cultural and biological evolution", who thus also come to constitute "non-historical people", that is a lesser, inferior people not capable of running their own affairs and managing their own resources (Foley 2008: 216). According to this racist theory, white man thus sacrifices himself by taking over the management of newly colonially annexed territories for the good and the advancement of the indigenous peoples. This is an old racist myth and a construct of white supremacy, known as the white men's burden, which McKay's final couplet mocks in reversal. "Little peoples" is a searing condemnation of the abuse of the principle of self-determination, originally launched by Lenin and the Soviet Union to advance decolonization, and which the USA along with the Allies usurped and appropriated in order to turn it into a political weapon of its own against the Bolsheviks and colonized peoples outside Europe. McKay's "Little Peoples" fully exposes "the Wilsonian cant about self-determination, which meant simply that colonies would be redescribed as 'protectorates' under Allied rule in a redivided globe" (Foley 2008: 115). For this reason, "Little Peoples" also functions as a fierce condemnation of Western imperialisms and racism, the sole purpose of which is to naturalize the landgrab and the superexploitation of peoples (re)subjected to colonial domination. This is most poignantly captured in McKay's line: "We to the ancient gods of greed and lust Must still be offered up as sacrifice" (McKay 2004: 136).

McKay's adamant stance against capitalism, racism and imperialism expounded in his proletarian sonnets resonated with Sylvia Pankhurst. Under her firm editorial leadership, *The Workers' Dreadnought* was a leading communist British magazine in the UK, dedicated to the fight against capitalism and imperialism. For a long time, it remained the only workers' avantgarde magazine to call for the implosion of racist constructs that major media outlets, controlled by British capital, started to spread among the working class in the wake of the post-WWI

economic crisis in Britain. In the summers of 1918 and 1919, Britain too was gripped by race riots, which capital and media owners fanned to divert attention from rising unemployment and hyperinflation, fearing a socialist uprising (Brown 2019: 34). This strategy worked and the result was numerous racially driven stabbings and deaths, particularly in the London docks during the "English red summers" of 1918 and 1919 (James 2022: 279). In her 1918 editorial titled "Stabbing Negroes in the London Dock Area" (James 2022: 283), Pankhurst was already asking readers to abstain from racially fomented hatred. She drove home the following points:

Do you not know that capitalists, and especially British capitalists, have seized, by force of arms, the countries inhabited by black people and are ruining those countries and the black inhabitants for their own profit? ... Do you not think you would be better employed in getting conditions made right for yourself and your fellow workers than in stabbing a blackman? (qtd. in James 2022: 283)

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In this context, not only did Pankhurst publish three of the McKay sonnets she selected from the July 1919 edition of New-York-based *Liberator*, but eventually she also invited McKay to come to London's East End and work for the magazine as a journalist. McKay moved from New York to London in 1919 but left a year later soon after Pankhurst's office was raided by Scotland Yard in October 1920 under The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and Pankhurst herself was arrested and imprisoned for six months on charges of sedition (Connelly 2013: 112; Davis 1999: 85; "Resolutions of Second Conference" 2023: 401). Pankhurst did not choose to republish McKay's "The Tired Worker", which appeared in the next, 18th of August edition of the New-York-based *Liberator* along with another sonnet "Spring in New Hampshire" (McKay 1919b: 46). This was probably due to the fact that at the time of publication she was about to publish the selection of McKay's sonnets which had first appeared in the *Liberator's* earlier July issue and also because McKay was preparing to leave for London.

However, "The Tired Worker" did appear alongside McKay's key sonnet from the earlier July edition of the *Liberator*, "If We Must Die", and it did so in the least likely or the least expected of places. This venue was not a literary magazine or a journal. McKay was under FBI surveillance for his Marxist activism as a journalist and a poet to the extent that upon his possible return from the Soviet Union, where he attended the Third International congress in 1922, he was to be denied entry to the United States (Maxwell 2015: 206). McKay also became the subject of an investigation set up by the first congressional anti-communist

committee in 1930, the little known first anti-communist "investigation committee", which was later overshadowed by a similar committee that ushered in the McCarthy era in the 1950s. In the committee's first publication *Investigation of Communist Propaganda*, dated 1930, "The Tired Worker" and "If we must die" sit side by side as exemplary pieces of McKay's "communist advocacy". Under the section "Literary column", itself part of a larger chapter titled "Investigation of communist propaganda", they are earmarked as potentially inflammatory pieces of argumentation. One speaks of a worker so exhausted after the constant daily toil that much needed sleep is not forthcoming, further cementing the agony of the superexploited. The other speaks of the necessity for proletarian black America to fight back and rebel against systemic exploitation and racial discrimination. The committee marked this as an explosive ideological mixture, stating the two proletarian sonnets "reflect the [dangerous] spirit of resentment and militancy which characterizes the new negro in America" (United States, Congress, Special Committee on the Communist Activities in the United States 1930: 566). The first Committee to Investigate Communist Activities sprang up in the midst of the economic crisis triggered by the Great Depression in 1929. It emerged in the context of "continuing tensions between deskilled industrial laborers, poor rural workers and employers over pay, conditions and the right to organize" and increasing "anxieties among the ruling elites over their potential displacement by rising social and ethnic groups" (Goodall 2014: 72). It tried to divert attention from rising dissatisfaction with living and working conditions in the wake of the Great Depression and, ludicrously, to pin the blame for the economic meltdown, brought about by the speculations in the stock market and cyclical crises of capitalism, to communists and by extension to the Soviet Union.¹⁰ This committee sank into oblivion but it paved the way for the establishment of a much more ominous and enduring institution of the same kind, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Set up in 1938 by the House of Representatives of the American Congress and disbanded as late as 1975, its task was to persecute people for their "political beliefs and associations" (Walker 2012: 99; *Today in Civil Liberties History*). The main targets were communists and people accused

¹⁰ The Soviet Union was accused of interfering in American affairs by "using its economic muscles to destabilize American businesses and markets" and "provoking hostility among ethnic and racial minorities" (Goodall 2014: 76). As further pointed out by Goodall, these preposterous claims on the part of the first American congressional anti-communist committee were launched on purpose to "link anger over the depression to a more traditional anti-communist agenda and to pre-empt liberal attacks by focusing heavily on Communist institutions rather than the left as a whole" (Goodall 2014: 73).

of fraternizing with communists or past members of such or similar organizations (*Today in Civil Liberties History*). If McKay featured prominently in the first committee's investigation report of 1930, one of the central places in the second committee's report was accorded to Louis Adamic, a prominent Slovene-American writer whose documentary fiction unsparingly vivisected American capitalism and agitated for workers' and minorities' rights. The Special Committee of Un-American Activities declared his socialist novels including *The Dynamite*, *The Native's Return* and *My Native Land* – which at the time of their publication were on par with Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* – an "attack upon American democracy" (United States, Congress, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities, Part 9, Volume 1, 1944a: 501). It further vilified Adamic for his involvement in the National Committee for People's Rights, initially known as the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. This was an organization that the Attorney General declared "subversive" to "American democracy", itself, ironically, based on institutional racism, systemic exploitation and American imperialism (United States, Congress, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities, Part 9, Volume 1, 1944a: 502).¹¹ And last but not least, it persecuted Adamic for his fierce antiimperialist and pro-Soviet, revolutionary stance that Adamic unscrupulously disseminated not only in his socially-engaged, documentary-like fiction but also in his editorials to the *Bulletin*, a publication of the United Committee of South Slavic Americans that gave significant support to Tito's partisans and socialist revolution in Yugoslavia (United States, Congress, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities, Part 9, Volume 1, 1944a: 504). In this way, McKay and Adamic's trajectories, ironically, converged as they both ended up in the committees' respective "investigation reports". But their paths, unbeknown to McKay, had crossed for the first time much earlier. This happened in the early 1930s in connection with the second cross-Atlantic journey that McKay's proletarian sonnet undertook, eventually making its way into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, where it was heartily embraced by the socialist literary circle of the *Ljubljanski zvon* magazine (*Ljubljana's Bell*).

¹¹ From Exhibit No. 1, supplied by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and featuring a list of members of the National Committee for People's Rights, it is evident that both Adamic and McKay were members of this political organization (Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities, Part 9, Volume 2, 1944b: 1179).

MCKAY'S PROLETARIAN SONNET: ITS SECOND VOYAGE TO EUROPE

Just like Sylvia Pankhurst in the UK, Anna Nussbaum (1887–1931) was responsible for introducing a new, socially awake and rebelliously anti-capitalist Afroamerica, to borrow McKay's term, to the German-speaking areas of Europe. This was black America that in the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s produced "poetry of power, protest, love, [and] endurance" (Cole 1977: 73), which Nussbaum wholeheartedly embraced. Nussbaum was one of the first women to obtain a PhD from the University of Vienna, doing so in 1907 (Wipplinger 2017: 177). She was an acknowledged translator, teacher and journalist associated with Viennese socialist editorial and literary circles. For her, translation was "a means of aiding the proletarian movement for global progress" (ÖNB, Frauen in Bewegung 1848–1938). Although in the early 1920s Nussbaum focused on the translation of French authors such as Rousseau, Rabelais and Barbusse, by the second half of the 1920s she had shifted to American fiction writers who dealt with social issues, more precisely Theodore Dreiser. In 1929, Nussbaum translated his novel *Sister Carrie* into German (Wipplinger 2017: 177; ÖNB, Frauen in Bewegung 1848–1938). In the meantime, her initial interest in "African diaspora" was stirred by the French novels of Paul Reboux, Rene Maran and Lucie Cousturier, which she reviewed in 1922 for the *Sozialistische Monatshefter*. Here she called for "greater realism within fictional portrayals of Africans" (Wipplinger 2017: 178). And finally, her interest in black America, its plight and struggle against systemic exploitation and institutional racism, intensified in 1927 when she contacted the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. That same year she translated and published two of his poems, "The negro speaks of Rivers" and "Porter", hailing Hughes as "a poet of the coloured proletariat, of the proletariat as such" (qtd. in Wipplinger 2017: 179). This contact was of pivotal importance for Nussbaum as it led her from sporadic translating to collecting some of the most progressive, socially-engaged contemporary Black American poetry into an anthology, the first anthology of contemporary African-American poetry to be published in Europe. The most representative pieces of Harlem Renaissance poetry were thus for the first time translated into German and in 1929 published in an anthology under the title *Afrika singt: eine Auslese neuer afro-amerikanischer Lyrik* (*Africa Sings: A Selection of New African-American Poetry*). For this purpose, Nussbaum exchanged copious correspondence, first with Langston Hughes and then with Du Bois, who turned out to be her key correspondent (Wipplinger 2017: 180). He put her in contact with other key African-American poets of the Harlem

Renaissance including Claude McKay and made it possible for her to gain access to these poets' latest publications (Wipplinger 2017: 180).¹² In this way, Nussbaum was able to expand the sources she relied upon in the compilation of the anthology *Afrika singt*. These went from merely three volumes, which included primarily Langston Hughes' collections of poetry (*Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*), to numerous poems by African-American poets extracted from "the journal the Crisis, Opportunity, and Carolina Magazine" and "ten separate poetry collections"¹³ including Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* published in 1922 (Wipplinger 2017: 180; Nussbaum 1929, n. pag.).

The anthology *Afrika singt*, edited by Anna Nussbaum and translated in collaboration with Anna Siemsen, Hermann Kesser and Josef Luitpold, contains exactly 100 poems by 18 Harlem Renaissance poets, including 21 by Claude McKay. In fact, Claude McKay's 21 poems¹⁴ and Langston Hughes' 37 poems together account for nearly two-thirds of the entire anthology. The anthology is divided into eleven, individually titled sections: I am a Negro (Ich bin ein Neger), The White God (Der weisse Gott), The New Homeland (Die neue Heimat), Work (Arbeit), You Whites (Ihr Weissen), The Black Woman (Die Schwarze Frau), Harlem, Poet's Dream (Dichtertraum), Love (Liebe), Liberation (Befreiung) and In Folk Sound (Blues) (Im Volkston [Blues]). McKay's 21 poems, of which fourteen are sonnets taken primarily from *Harlem Shadows*, feature in each of the sections with the exception of the last and the middle section (The

¹² Preserved correspondence shows that Nussbaum, for example, wrote a letter to Du Bois, dated August 14, 1928, in which she requests Du Bois to procure for her James Weldon Johnson's anthology *The Book of American Negro poetry* (Nussbaum 1928).

¹³ Owing to her correspondence with Du Bois, Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance poets, Nussbaum extended her list of sources to include three other anthologies in addition to *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited and published in 1925 by Alain Locke, which she originally started out with. These included *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) edited by James Weldon Johnson, *An Anthology of Verse by American Negroes* (1924) edited by Newman I. White and Walter Clinton Jackson, and *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (1927) edited by Countee Cullen (Ramey 2008: 39). In one of the brief notes, accompanying the preface to *Afrika singt*, Nussbaum also cites collections of poetry by individual authors as her primary sources. In addition to Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), she lists Claude McKay's collection *Harlem Shadows* (1922), Countee Cullen's *Color* (1925) and *Copper-Sun* (1927) and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *The Heart of a Woman* (1918).

¹⁴ These include: "In Bondage", "The Tropics in New York", "On Broadway", "Dawn in New York", "America", "The Tired Worker", "On the Road", "White Houses/The White House", "To the White Fiends", "The Lynching", "The White City", "The Harlem Dancer", "Harlem Shadows", "Like a Strong Tree", "When I Have Passed Away", "Romance", "Jasmines", "Enslaved", "Baptism", "If We Must Die" and "Exhortation: Summer 1919".

Black Woman). McKay's proletarian sonnet "The Tired Worker", which attracted the attention of the literary circle at the *Ljubljanski zvon*, appears in the section "Work" along with another McKay's sonnet, "On the road". *Afrika singt* was the first European anthology ever to be dedicated exclusively to black poetry, specifically to Harlem Renaissance poetry, and the first European anthology featuring African-American poets, whose works were translated for the first time and published in a language other than English. This was a point driven home by Nussbaum herself in the opening sentence of the preface: "Here for the first time the attempt is made to give in the German language an inclusive selection of Afro-American lyrics" (trans. and qtd. in Cole 1977: 73; Nussbaum 1929: 8).

Upon its publication, the anthology *Afrika singt* "sent shockwaves through intellectual circles in Austria and Germany" (Cole 1977: 72). It introduced a totally new perspective on Black America – a Black America that is alert and engaged, a Black America that is fully awakened and deeply involved in struggle against systemic injustices. The anthology became a must-have item for leftists and it was to be found not only on their bookshelves as intellectual study material but as welcome reading material on parlour tables in their guest rooms (Wipplinger 2017: 183–184). Its impact was immense: the publication of *Afrika singt* triggered new translations of works by African-American poets and numerous republications of the poems already included in the anthology. This took place not only in various newspapers, journals and other outlets across Austria but across the entire German-speaking region of Europe and beyond (Wipplinger 2017: 183).¹⁵ In short, "*Afrika singt* gave speakers of German outside of Germany, Austria and Switzerland access to [African-American] poetry" (Wipplinger 2017: 184). It was in this way that Mile Klopčič, a socially engaged Slovene avantgarde poet proficient in German but not English, came across Harlem Renaissance poets and specifically Claude McKay's proletarian sonnets. In one of his interviews, he explicitly refers to Nussbaum's anthology as his main reference source (Petrič 2008: 5). Nussbaum's anthology *Afrika singt* served as a launchpad for the publication

¹⁵ The extent of influence this anthology exercised on the left cultural landscape is also reflected in the fact that as many as seventeen poems (by Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen and Frank Horne) were set to music by six renowned jazz and opera/orchestra composers of the period. These included Wilhelm Grosz, Fritz Kramer, Edmund Nick, Kurt Pahlen, Erich Zeisl and Alexander Zemlinsky (Cole 1977: 76, 73; Ramey 2008: 39). The anthology received positive reviews in the USA, too. Du Bois himself penned the review for the USA African-American magazine *The Crisis*, an organ of NAACP headed by Du Bois. In his letter to Nussbaum of February 25, 1929 Du Bois thanks her for her "excellent Anthology", further stating on behalf of National Association of the Advancement of the Colored People: "We appreciate very much what you have done" (Du Bois 1929).

of selected poems of Harlem Renaissance in *Ljubljanski zvon*¹⁶ in 1932, with Claude McKay's "The Tired Worker" being accorded one of the central positions.

In his memoirs, Mile Klopčič (1905–1984) recounts that before publishing his translation of McKay's proletarian sonnet "The Tired Worker" and other poems by selected African-American poets from German into Slovene, he met with Louis Adamic (1898–1951) in May 1932 during his Yugoslav tour (Klopčič 1981: 259). This turned out to be of crucial importance. Adamic was

¹⁶ The *Ljubljanski zvon* magazine was founded in Ljubljana on 1st January 1881 after its Vienna-based predecessor *Zvon* (*Bell*) ceased to publish in 1880. For nearly six decades, *Ljubljanski zvon* was the central literary monthly published in Slovene. It brought together the liberal and clerical camps of the bourgeois Slovene literati, but in 1888 the clerical camp seceded in order to establish its own literary magazine *Dom in Svet* (*Home and the World*). At the end of the nineteenth century, *Ljubljanski zvon* enjoyed the status of a literary monthly that fostered realism in literature rather than naturalism (Mager 2025). Under the editorial intervention of Viktor Bežek, it began to devote more and more space to the so-called modernists. Their writing was based on a particular strand of realism that no longer catered to an upper and middle-class readership due to its explosive, non-voyeuristic and down-to-earth, socially-engaged content. Modernists, headed by Ivan Cankar, questioned and problematized systemic social injustices that affected the most exploited segments of the population. In 1931, in addition to literary pieces, the monthly started to include analytical contributions on current social issues such as rising living costs, depressed wages, mass firings and the ensuing strikes (Legiša 1969: 316; Mager 2025). This was due to the fact that the editorial board was taken over by the sympathizers of the Communist Party, which the Karađorđević regime first partially banned in 1920 and then completely in 1924. It declared the Communist Party illegitimate and made its members subject to brutal persecution after the party won a large share of the vote in the first national elections following the establishment of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs in 1919. The Communist Party resorted to taking over the editorial boards of well-established journals in order to evade censorship and to continue raising critical social awareness by relying on literary circles and other cultural outlets (Dolenc 1989: 327, 346). For this purpose, *Ljubljanski zvon* began to publish theoretical contributions on poetry, drama and literature, this time again favouring realism while problematizing and rejecting expressionism. In a 1937 issue of *Ljubljanski zvon*, we read: "Realism is a method of scientific inquiry applied to art. Art will not be able to abandon this approach as long as its goal remains the exploration of the human psyche and the critique of society" (qtd. in Legiša 1969: 337). In the second half of the 1930s, *Ljubljanski zvon* and its sister magazine *Sodobnost* (*Modernity*) were at the forefront of the socialist literary avantgarde and enjoyed the reputation of being the two most important literary magazines published in Slovene (Gabrič 1991: 480). In 1941, following the invasion and occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, *Ljubljanski zvon* ceased to exist. As so many other avantgarde journals of the time, it answered the call of the Communist Party of Slovenia. The Communist Party, which gathered avantgarde cultural workers under its wings, declared the so-called "institutional culture's silence" as a sign of resistance to the Nazi and Fascist occupying forces. The editorial board of *Ljubljanski zvon*, along with its associates and other cultural workers, went underground to produce resistance literature, drama and poetry, thus making its own contribution to the partisan liberation movement organized and led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Gabrič 1991: 481).

an acknowledged Slovene-American writer and a journalist who migrated to the USA in 1913. Adamic had just published his second novel *The Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), in part an autobiography and in part a critique of the American melting pot, which won him great critical acclaim. Adamic was also a recipient of a prestigious Guggenheim award (Guggenheim Foundation), which he won for his first and ground-breaking novel *The Dynamite: A Century of Class Violence in America* (1931), dealing with the historical trajectory and contemporary developments of class conflict in the United States. By writing this novel, Adamic intended to "shock non-proletarian readers with the story of proletarian suffering and a picture of the social consequences of the class war" (qtd. in Vecoli 1981: 164). *The Dynamite* launched him into the literary orbit both in the USA and in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, "establish[ing] Adamic's literary reputation" (Vecoli 1981: 155). The Guggenheim monetary award enabled Adamic to travel to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia where he planned to gather enough material to write a new documentary novel which would serve as a social critique on the living and working conditions of ordinary people in his former home country. Upon his arrival, Adamic was solicited by the Karađorđević court to paint a favourable picture of the Karađorđević regime, for which he was to be offered monetary aid and infrastructural support including help with accommodation and possibly by extension with the setting up of informants on the terrain (Čuljak 1981: 275; Klopčič 1981: 262). Adamic promptly refused the offer. Instead, he had already turned to the circle of socialist revolutionary-minded literati in Slovenia as his most reliable source of information on life in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.¹⁷ It was

¹⁷ The novel in question was *The Native's Return*, published in the USA in 1934. That very same year, according to Čuljak, it was proclaimed the book of the year, to be then republished twenty-two times over the span of the next ten years alone (Čuljak 1981: 278). The novel was immediately banned in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Karađorđević regime along with the pamphlet *The Struggle*, which Adamic published a year later in 1935 (Christian 1981: 332). The pamphlet was based on the testimonies of some key Yugoslav communists, primarily Edvard Kardelj, who supplied Adamic during his Yugoslav tour with detailed first-hand descriptions of the brutal persecution of communists in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the suffering they underwent at the state prison Glavnjača, which the regime erected specifically to imprison communists (Klopčič 1981: 262; Paternu 1981: 99). Adamic himself added a critical foreword to the testimonies and wrapped them up with a letter of protest against the brutal treatment communists were subjected to in Glavnjača prison and at large (Paternu 1981: 99). As Adamic was well-connected and held in high esteem by the American avantgarde, it does not come as a surprise that among the 44 American dignitaries who signed the letter of protest were also Upton Sinclair, Theodor Dreiser, and John Dos Passos (Paternu 1981: 99). Ironically, Adamic secretly allocated the proceeds from *The Struggle* to the Yugoslav communists' Red Aid (Christian 1981: 332). Interestingly, the first person responsible for putting Adamic in touch with the key communists (Boris Kidrič and Edvard Kardelj) who

this group, which included Oton Župančič, Juš Kozjak, Anton Melik and Fran Albreht (the then editor of *Ljubljanski zvon*), that greeted Adamic enthusiastically and organized their first meeting with him in Ljubljana in May 1932.

In his short memoirs, Mile Klopčič recounts how he accompanied Adamic to the meeting and that it was during their walk to the inn across the Tivoli park in Ljubljana that Klopčič informed Adamic he had completed the translation of some of the Harlem Renaissance poets into Slovene, including the proletarian sonnet by Claude McKay titled "The Tired Worker". In his memoirs, Klopčič writes:

I accompanied Louis and Stella [Adamic's wife] to this meeting at Čad's inn. On our way through the Tivoli park, I mentioned that I had just completed translating some poems by black American poets from German translations. Louis seemed to be pleasantly surprised. He immediately translated what I said to Stella, and inquired after the names of the poets whose poems I had translated. When I gave him the names, I saw that he knew these poets, some of them personally. He said he would write immediately back to America to have some of the collected works by these poets sent to him from his own library and delivered to me. In this way I could compare my translations [from German] with the originals. Indeed, after about three or four weeks, I already had the books in my hands, and Olga Škerljeva and I reviewed the translations, which were then published in the "American" issue of *Zvon* in the autumn of 1932. The poets whose poems were published were J. W. Johnson, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. Another interesting fact: Langston Hughes, one of the most renowned African-American poets, contacted me a few months later by sending me a letter ... from the Soviet Tashkent. He thanked me for the effort I had taken with [his colleagues'] verses and his own. Apparently, Adamic had sent him that issue of *Zvon*. (Klopčič 1981: 260–261)

Adamic ordered the delivery of anthologies of Harlem Renaissance poetry for Klopčič, urging him to compare and possibly improve his translations from German with the originals in English. The result of this exchange was that Mile Klopčič published a selection of African-American poems in the autumn 1932 issue of *Ljubljanski zvon*, two of which, according to Petrič, were translated directly from English – Sterling Brown's "Maumee Ruth" and James Weldon Johnson's

provided the testimonies for him was none other than Mile Klopčič. As he recounts in his memoirs, it was during their walk through the Tivoli park and while discussing African-American poets that Klopčič also advised Adamic to seek contact with the communist operatives in Rogaška Slatina. There Adamic eventually managed to establish his first contact with Kidrič and only later with Kardelj (Klopčič 1981: 262).

"Creation" (Petrič 2008: 8).¹⁸ The remaining five were extracted from *Afrika singt* and were Slovene translations of German translations, but evidently, where possible, also compared against the English originals. Klopčič himself drew the readership's attention to this fact by pointing out that "translations are based on German translations" but adding, however, that since "it was impossible to compare all of them against the originals in English, they should be better read as 'free translations'" (1932a: 431). These poems included "The Creation" ("Stvarjenje") by James Weldon Johnson, "Brown Boy to Brown Girl" ("Črnc govori črnki") by Countee Cullen, "Our Land" ("Naša dežela") and "The New Cabaret Girl" ("Novo dekle v kabaretu") by Langston Hughes, and "The Tired Worker" ("Trudni delavec") by Claude McKay. Klopčič also wrote a short introduction to this section of the 1932 autumn issue of *Ljubljanski zvon*, which introduced black African poetry of the late 1910s and the 1920s, charged with revolutionary zeal, to the South Slavic readership. In addition to a few general observations on the nature of the poetry of the "New Negro", a substantial part of an otherwise sketchy introduction is dedicated to Claude McKay. Klopčič informs the readership that McKay has published a poetry collection titled *Harlem Shadows* and that he has "travelled widely across Europe" and "spent a substantial amount of his time in the Soviet Russia" (1932a: 431). This was far from an insignificant piece of information. In fact, it served as the highest possible recommendation of the poet since the October Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union were a beacon of light for the socialist leftists and communist literati in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Klopčič's translation of McKay's proletarian sonnet "The Tired Worker" can be found on pages 334 to 345 of the 1932 autumn edition of *Ljubljanski zvon*. McKay highlights the repetitive cycle of drudgery caused by extremely long working hours that exhaust the bodies and maim the minds of oppressed labourers. This set of circumstances reduces workers to an assemblage of "tired hands" and "aching feet", bodies too "weary" to be able to get enough sleep let alone to organize and rise up against structural inequalities (McKay 2004: 173). With days dreaded and nights eagerly awaited, much needed rest on the part of the exhausted workers is nowhere to be found. The exhausted body is too restless to be enveloped in sleep, even when most needed. Sleep itself is an unattainable luxury. The coming dawn for those who are condemned to toiling all day long for others in exchange for poverty wages announces not only the beginning of a

¹⁸ Indeed, the two poets and their poems are not to be found in Nussbaum's anthology *Afrika singt*.

new, daily cycle of drudgery but an endless extension of permanent exhaustion and weariness. This is captured in the concluding tercet: "O dawn! O dreaded dawn! O let me rest / Weary my veins, my brain, my life! Have pity! / No! Once again the harsh, the ugly city" (McKay 2004: 173). Klopčič managed to capture this atmosphere, best seen if compared with McKay's original:

Predrami se mi, duša, šepetaj.
Glej, sanje dahnil v mesto je večer.
Srce uporno, zdaj je blažen mir.
V vsemir razlil je mesec svoj sijaj.

O whisper, O my soul! The afternoon
is waning into evening, whisper soft!
peace, o my waning heart! for soon the moon
from its misty veil will swing aloft!

Trudno telo, zdaj ni več zate dela,
In noč v svoj črni plašč te bo odela.
Polóži spat izmučene roké
Polóži spat izmučene nogé!

Be patient, weary body, soon the night
will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet,
and with a laden sigh thou wilt invite
to rest thy tired hands and aching feet.

Ukradli so mi dan. Noči so moje!
Sem pridi, vzemi me v naročje svoje.
A kaj kot vino raz nebo prši?

The wretched day was theirs, the night is mine;
Come tender sleep, and fold me to thy breast.
But what steals out the gray clouds red like wine?

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O zarja dneva! – Proč, da bom počival.
Ves truden sem, ubit in rad bi snival.
Joj, mesto se neusmiljeno budi.

O dawn! O dreaded dawn! O let me rest
weary ma veins, my brain, my Life! Have pity!
No! Once again the harsh, the ugly city.¹⁹

(Klopčič 1932b: 434 – 435)

(McKay 2004: 173)

Klopčič placed emphasis on the content while sacrificing the rhyme scheme of the English sonnet that McKay's original builds upon. In terms of content development, McKay's sonnet and Klopčič's translation are much closer than meets the eye. In fact, McKay's original may follow the rhyme scheme of the English sonnet but in terms of content development it is an Italian sonnet. This is overlooked by Petrič who claims: "Whereas Luitpold [the German translator] concentrated on preserving the Shakespearean sonnet form, Klopčič tried to create an Italian

¹⁹ The German translation of "The Tired Worker" (Der Müde Arbeiter) by Josef Luitpold follows the pattern of the English sonnet: "Erwache, Seele! Flüstere! Abend haucht / Traum in die Straßen. Seele, wag dich vor. / O Frieden, du rebellenherz! Es taucht / Der Mond ins All aus Dunst und Nebelflor. // Jetzt hast du nichts mehr, müder Leib, zu tun. / Mit schwarzem Mantel deckt die Nacht dich zu. / So bette du die müden Hände nun, / Die müden Füße bette nun zu Ruh. // Tag schurkisch mir gestohlen. Nacht: noch mein. / Komm, guter Schlaf, nimm and dein Herz mich nun. / Was rieselt aus den Wolken rot wie Wein? / O Morgenhöllenrot! O lasst mich ruhn. // Müd! Müd! So müd! O Nacht! O nichts mehr schauen. / Doch grausam wächst di Stadt aus Grau und Grauen" (Nussbaum 1929: 56).

sonnet but failed in terms of the rhyme scheme" (2008: 9). McKay's "The Tired Worker" follows the scheme of the Italian sonnet in terms of its argumentative structural layout. It consists of an octave, subdivided into two quatrains, which together introduce the problem of a weary toiler desperately yearning to get some sleep. The remaining part of the sonnet delivers the bitter disappointment and comes in the form of the sestet, subdivided into two tercets. The volta is introduced in the fourth-but-last line and not at the beginning of the couplet as pertains to the English sonnet. Klopčič's translation is in fact an exact reproduction of the pattern as originally laid out by McKay in his sonnet.

CONCLUSION

Klopčič's translation of "The Tired Worker" manages to preserve the focal point of McKay's sonnet, which is the dreaded atmosphere of utter exhaustion, with workers getting no respite either during the day or at night. In the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, this described the actual state-of-affairs facing the working-class at the time. It is hardly a coincidence that McKay's proletarian sonnet, and specifically "The Tired Worker", found its way into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia amid an early strike-wave, which followed the 1929 global collapse of the capitalist economy and markets. In the early 1930s, capital in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and elsewhere tried to recuperate its losses accrued during the Great Depression by extending working hours to 12 hours per day and by increasing, even doubling, the workload of re-hired workers whom it sacked during the crisis on a massive scale (VTSS 1956: 19, 21). While increasing the workload, capital at the same time depressed wages, which fell way below the pre-1929 levels and which further failed to meet living costs due to rising inflation (VTSS 1956: 16, 19, 22). Workers had to work twice as much for twice as little. McKay's proletarian sonnet with its consciousness-raising potential entered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the midst of social upheavals and a strike-wave coordinated by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (VTSS 1956: 18). This took place thirteen years after its first voyage across the Atlantic and merely three years after it made its second European debut in Nussbaum's German anthology *Afrika singt*. It was black America that gave the Balkans its proletarian sonnet.

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S a ž e t a k

PUTOVANJE MCKAYEVA PROLETERSKOG SONETA I NJEGOVE KULTURNE MREŽE: OD NEW YORKA PREKO LONDONA I BEČA DO LJUBLJANE

Claude McKay bio je prvi afroamerički pjesnik koji je stekao ugled pisanjem društveno angažiranih soneta, od kojih je većinu objavio između 1917. i 1923. godine, na vrhuncu svoje pjesničke i književne karijere. McKay je začetnik takozvanog proleterskog soneta, koji je u prvi plan stavio marksističku analizu sustavne eksploatacije, kapitalizma, rasizma i imperijalizma. Ovaj rad istražuje putovanje McKayeve proleterskog soneta preko Atlantika putem novina *The Workers Dreadnought* urednice Sylvije Pankhurst iz 1919. godine te antologije *Afrika Singt* urednice Anne Nussbaum iz 1929. Potonja se pokazala značajnom za Balkan, točnije za krug socijalističkih književnika okupljenih oko časopisa *Ljubljanski zvon*. Zahvaljujući nastojanjima i predanosti te skupine, uključujući Milu Klopčiča, te uz pomoć Louisa Adamica, McKayev proleterski sonet ušao je u južnoslavenski kulturni prostor početkom 1930-ih, samo tri godine nakon objavljivanja antologije *Afrika Singt*.

Ključne riječi: Claude McKay, proleterski sonet, Sylvia Pankhurst, Anna Nussbaum, Mile Klopčič, Louis Adamic, Kraljevina Jugoslavija